I. The Comma, the Semicolon, and the Colon

Many of us confuse the uses of the comma, the semicolon, and the colon, all of which are internal marks of punctuation. But their distinguishing characteristics become clearer once we see these three punctuation marks in relation to one another. Below I have given the most common uses of the three.

A. The comma, the most basic internal mark of punctuation, is used

1. to set off non-defining modifiers (including introductory phrases and clauses), non-defining appositives, interjections, and parenthetical phrases:

   -In our house on North Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi, where I was born, the oldest of three children, in 1909, we grew up to the striking of clocks. (Eudora Welty)

2. to separate items in a series:

   -There was a mission-style oak grandfather clock standing in the hall, which sent its gong-like strokes through the livingroom, diningroom, kitchen, and pantry, and up the sounding board of the stairwell.

3. with a coordinating conjunction to separate independent clauses in compound sentences. (See discussion and examples in II below.)

B. As its appearance suggests, a semicolon is half comma and half period; it indicates a stronger break than the comma provides and a weaker one than the period. It has two basic uses:

1. to separate independent clauses in compound sentences when a coordinating conjunction does not appear between the two clauses (see discussion and examples in II below), and

2. to separate items in a series when a comma would not be a strong enough break because other commas appear within one or more items in the series.

   -We traveled to Memphis, Tennessee; Petal, Mississippi; and Wise, Virginia.
C. The **colon** is an interesting mark of punctuation with two special (but related) uses:

1. **to indicate that a list will follow:**

   Here are the things that made him so popular: his blond good looks, his twinkling personality, his red '73 convertible, and his star position on the football team. (This example also illustrates I.A.2. above.)

2. **to indicate that a definition, explanation, or elaboration of the immediately preceding word or comment will follow:**

   My mother would remark, "There's one thing I will have to say about Mother Welty: she makes the best bread I ever put in my mouth." (Eudora Welty)

(See also related examples under II. below.)

II. **Dependency and Independency**

A **clause** is a unit of words which contains a subject and a predicate. Some clauses are independent; others are dependent. (An independent clause is a unit of words that **could** be--though it may not be--treated as a complete sentence. A dependent clause, though also containing a subject-verb relationship, includes as well an element that makes it structurally dependent on another unit of words.) The uses of the following connectives with clauses are sometimes confused.

A. **Coordinating conjunctions** join things of equal rank: two nouns, two verbs, two independent clauses, two dependent clauses, etc. The coordinating conjunctions are the following:

   and    nor    so    for
   but    or    yet

   When a coordinating conjunction joins two independent clauses, we normally place a comma before the conjunction (unless the clauses are quite short) to signal the end of the first clause. Example:

   -No one ever expects to win the state lottery, but everyone who buys a chance in it hopes to do so.

   -Daddy made for us himself elaborate kites that needed to be taken miles out of town to a pasture long enough (and my father was not afraid of horses and cows watching) for him to run with and get up on a long cord to which my mother held the
spindle, and then we children were given it to hold, tugging like something alive at our hands. (Eudora Welty)

When two independent clauses are joined without a coordinating conjunction, a mark of punctuation stronger than the comma is generally necessary to separate the two clauses. A semicolon (half period, half comma) is the most common punctuation used; a colon or a dash is appropriate occasionally. Examples:

- In my eyes Charlie was more than a brother could ever be; he was the best, the greatest—he could do no wrong.

- My mother read secondarily for information; she sank as a hedonist into novels. (Eudora Welty)

- When I was young enough to still spend a long time buttoning my shoes in the morning, I'd listen toward the hall: Daddy upstairs was shaving in the bathroom and Mother downstairs was frying the bacon. They would begin whistling back and forth to each other up and down the stairwell. (Eudora Welty)

B. Subordinating Conjunctions do exactly what their name implies. They both subordinate and connect the clause which they introduce to the main (independent) clause of the sentence. The subordinate clause is a dependent clause: it depends on something in the main clause to complete its meaning.

The most common subordinating conjunctions are the following. (Some of these can also be used as prepositions.)

after before when
although because whereas
as if while
since

When a subordinate clause beginning with one of the above precedes the main clause of a sentence, we conventionally mark its end with a comma. The comma signals that the dependent unit (a modifier) has ended and the main clause is about to begin. Example:

- When a subordinate clause beginning with one of the above precedes the main clause of a sentence, we conventionally mark its end with a comma.
C. **Conjunctive Adverbs** are adverbs that express a relationship or connection between (usually) two independent clauses. Unlike subordinating conjunctions and coordinating conjunctions but like adverbs, conjunctive adverbs are moveable and thus can occupy different positions within the main clause to which they belong. The most common conjunctive adverbs (some of which can also serve as simple adverbs) are these:

- however
- moreover
- therefore
- nevertheless
- furthermore
- otherwise
- likewise
- hence
- thus
- in fact
- indeed
- instead
- after all
- also
- still
- then

As stated previously, a comma is a strong enough mark of punctuation to use between most independent clauses only if a **coordinating** conjunction joins the two clauses. When instead a conjunctive adverb (more adverb than conjunction) “joins” two independent clauses, a **semicolon** precedes it and a comma normally follows it.

-This incident seems trivial compared to some difficulties I have undergone; however, at the time it occurred it seemed world-shattering.

Notice that the conjunctive adverb, as is common with adverbs, can be moved to another position within the second clause without changing the sentence’s meaning. Notice the punctuation also.

-This incident seems trivial compared to some difficulties I have undergone; at the time it occurred, however, it seemed world-shattering.

The semicolon remains at its original position: it separates the two independent clauses. The conjunctive adverb, moved to the interior position, is punctuated as a non-defining modifier usually is: it is set off with commas.