

Pet Peeves & Punctual Punctuation

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Contributor

As a tutor, I have seen many errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation that have made me laugh, and even made me cry. The ones that have made me cry are the most common errors, such as comma usage, semi-colon usage, the misuse of 'affect' and 'effect,' and the all too often misuse of 'your,' 'you're,' and 'there,' 'they're,' and 'their.' And let's not forget the infamous 'its' and 'it's.' These are

mistakes that are so common, I have found them in magazines, newspapers, books, and even in my own writing, so don't feel bad if you are someone who makes these same errors.

These are all errors that a spell-checker won't pick up on, which is why we have to read over our essays before we hand them in. Just because the essay on the computer screen doesn't have any red or green underlined words, doesn't mean that it is grammatically and spelling perfect. A basic understanding of these errors will help you to avoid making them again in the future. We'll start with punctuation.

Commas are so often over-used and/or underused, because the writer does not know how to properly use them in the written sentence. When I was in elementary school, I can remember being told to listen to how we form our spoken sentences and to think about the pauses in

each sentence, and where there was a pause to put in a comma. As a general rule this could work, but as a result, I find I put in too many commas. I have to go back over my work and check for unnecessary comma usage. As a solid rule, general rules don't always work.

There is an excellent website for punctuation and grammar called "The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation" by Jane Straus. You

equally convey the same meaning if you said *When we were at the lake hardly anyone was there.* In the instance of this sentence, it would depend upon who our listener was. If it was someone who had never been to that lake, they would not realize that it was usually crowded if you omitted that particular piece of information.

Last, but certainly not least, using a comma to separate two sen-

semi-colon can be used in a sentence in place of a comma when the conjunction is left out. For example, *I went for a hike around the lake; it was not as crowded as I had thought it would be.* Notice that in this example taken from above, that I have removed the comma and the but and replaced it with a semi-colon.

A semi-colon can also be used when listing items that already have a

comma in them to help avoid confusion. For example, *This summer, I vis-*

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can also buy the book by the same name, but everything you need is online at www.bluebook.com. She has listed eighteen rules just for commas. I will only go through three of the most important ones. If you feel you are having a lot of trouble with comma use, I suggest checking out this great website.

When you are listing three or more items in a sentence, commas should be used to separate them. For example, *I saw a bear, a coyote, and a squirrel today while on the hike.* Notice, however, that if you only have two items listed, commas are not necessary.

When you place an 'aside' in your sentence that is not necessary to convey the full meaning of the sentence, surround this 'aside' with commas. For example, *When we were at the lake, which is normally crowded, hardly anyone was there.* Notice that this sentence could

ences joined by a conjunction, and, but, or, for, & nor, is optional. For example, *I went for a hike around the lake, but it was not as crowded as I had thought it would be.* Or, *I went for a hike around the lake but it was not as crowded as I had thought it would be.* Either way is acceptable, and is more a matter of personal preference. Check out the other rules at the Blue Book website to learn more.

Semi-colons are another punctuation that are commonly misused. I think this is because they are so complicated to explain that in elementary and high school, teachers tend to avoid them as much as possible. Therefore people don't use them. People are afraid of them. It's true.

Again, the Blue Book website has several rules for this misunderstood part of punctuation; here we will only go through a couple. A

ited Craigellachie, British Columbia; Regina, Saskatchewan; and Halifax, Nova Scotia. Notice that if I had placed another comma after British Columbia instead of a semi-colon, people who had never heard of Craigellachie would not distinguish it as being in British Columbia.

I hope that this article helps you better understand a largely misunderstood part of punctuation. In part 2 of this article, I will explain the differences between the words I mentioned earlier in the article that are commonly misused.

If you have a question for a qualified tutor in the area of writing, time management, grammar, and punctuation, write to Rebecca at questions_for_a_tutor@yahoo.ca. I will try to answer as many questions as possible in this column, but every email will receive an answer to the best of my abilities.

If you have questions you want to ask a qualified tutor regarding study techniques, time management, grammar, or anything at all that you may need help with, send your questions* to

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