

# Punctuation Day Quiz

Legal Writing Academy

# Question 1

Comma Coma

- A. In law school you will study contracts, property, torts and legal process.
- B. In law school, you will study contracts, property, torts, and legal process.
- C. In law school, you will study: contracts, property, torts and legal process.
- D. All of the above.

The answer is B, if you are follower of the Oxford or serial comma. The answer could be A, if you are not an Oxford comma proponent.

But here is why you should be a fan of the Oxford comma. The Oxford comma avoids ambiguity. Here, the comma tells the reader that torts and legal process are two separate courses. You will hear many writing experts argue that the serial comma is unnecessary and just adds clutter. It is true that for many sentences the extra comma will not make a difference to the reader's correct understanding; however, the extra comma will eliminate an ambiguity in many sentences. In legal writing, your goal is to be clear and precise. So, use the serial comma consistently to avoid any confusion for your reader.

C is not correct. Colons can be used to set up a list of items, but the most important thing to remember about colons is that you only use them after a stem (the part of the sentence that sets up the list) that is a complete sentence. You don't use a colon after a sentence fragment. Here, "In law school, you will study" is arguably a full sentence (yes, you will study!), but in the context of this sentence, it is not a complete thought without the listed words. So, no colon.

# Question 2

## Quote Correctly

- A. “The decision of the lower court is quashed”--stated Justice Wu--  
“and the case is sent back for rehearing”.
- B. “The decision of the lower court is quashed,” stated Justice Wu, “and  
the case is sent back for rehearing.”
- C. “The decision of the lower court is quashed” stated Justice Wu “and  
the case is sent back for rehearing”.
- D. All of the above

You need quotation marks around the quoted words and commas to set off the words “stated Justice Wu”. The final period goes inside the quotation mark. If the entire sentence is in quotation marks, the terminal punctuation (either period, question, or exclamation mark) is placed inside the quotations marks.

For example:

“He has only himself to blame for his loss.”

If one speech or quotation occurs within another, enclose it in single quotes if you normally use double quotes (UK and US rules are reversed here).

For example:

Justice Wu said, “Counsel stated, ‘The decision was properly made.’”

Note the quotation marks at the end of the sentence. You need both single and double.

# Question 3

Ask a Question?

- A. The judge asked, “How do you plead?”.
- B. The judge asked “How do you plead”?
- C. The judge asked, “How do you plead?”
- D. All of the above.

You need a comma to set off the quoted words. The question mark goes inside the quotation marks because it is part of the quoted words. You don't need to put a period at the end of the sentence because you already have a punctuation mark inside the quotation. You don't need both.

# Question 4

## Apostrophe Anxiety

- A. It's difficult to believe this witness's testimony.
- B. It's difficult to believe this witnesses testimony.
- C. Its difficult to believe this witness' testimony.
- D. All of the above.

There are two punctuation challenges in this sentence.

The first is knowing the difference between *it's* and *its*. *It's* is the contraction of *It is*; *its* is the possessive of *it*.

The second is knowing how to write the possessive form of a word that ends with *s*. The problem is that there isn't a simple or universal rule. Words that end with *s* can have just an apostrophe at the end to show possession. The most widely used technique for deciding how to punctuate the plural for words ending with *s* is follow how the word sounds in the plural form. If you would pronounce the plural as *witnesses*, then you would put in an apostrophe and *s* in the possessive form. If you would not pronounce it with an extra syllable, then just put the apostrophe after the "s". For example, the term "for goodness' sake", would not be written as "goodness's sake".

So, you do have options with the plural of words ending with *s*. But whatever you choose, be consistent.

# Question 5

## Semi-colon stress

- A. The defendant was not credible therefore the jury voted to convict her.
- B. The defendant was not credible, therefore; the jury voted to convict her.
- C. The defendant was not credible; therefore, the jury voted to convict her.
- D. All of the above.

A semi-colon can join two independent clauses. You could have two separate sentences here: *The defendant was not credible. The jury voted to convict her.* But a semi-colon and a transitional word or phrase connect these two related thoughts. Those transitional words (therefore, however, so, etc.) need a semi-colon before and a comma after.

But don't overdo it. If you use the semi-colon transitions too often your sentences look complicated, overly long, and a bit pompous. And you start to look like a grammar geek.

# Bonus Question

## Bonus Question

- A. One crucial witness (the defendant's brother) refused to corroborate the alibi.
- B. One crucial witness—the defendant's brother—refused to corroborate the alibi.
- C. One crucial witness, the defendant's brother, refused to corroborate the alibi.
- D. All of the above.

Each of the answers is grammatically correct and the choice depends on the effect you wish to create.

- The parentheses in A tell the reader the information inside the parentheses isn't as crucial to the meaning of the sentence. So, it isn't really important that the critical witness was the brother.
- The em dashes in B, on the other hand, tell the reader that it is very important to know that the brother was the witness.
- The commas in C tell the reader the fact that the witness is the defendant's brother is worth mentioning, but is something of an aside.