In writing, punctuation plays the role of body language. It helps readers hear you the way you want to be heard.” —Russell Baker

There’s no reason why good academic prose can’t also be stylistically interesting. The “academic” or “research” essay is a sub-type of the broader genre known as the essay. But adjectives such as turgid, viscous, and pompous needn’t naturally attach themselves to scholarly writing. Quite the contrary. It seems obvious that as writers of academic prose we should strive to cultivate in ourselves an abiding interest in the English language and the rhetorical means by which we convey our ideas and thoughts in words. To paraphrase the urgings of noted rhetorician Richard Lanham, we need to get past the simplistic, reductive attitude that privileges writing that has as its sole purpose the conveying of information (e.g., an “Owner’s Manual”). That is, we need to balance concentration on looking through language to its supposed “meaning” with a real interest in looking at words themselves, in how we construct the sentences used to convey our meaning. Shakespeare, for example, took great delight in language for its own sake, and we should bear that in mind as we seek to write academic prose that is at once solid, effective, and stylish.

To that end, one goal in this course will be for you to develop fresh and effective ways of writing good academic prose. One key way for doing that, often overlooked by many writers in all kinds of fields, is to learn how to use punctuation to maximum rhetorical advantage. Punctuation marks are among the elements that, used wisely, can turn ordinary prose into a beautifully orchestrated piece of writing. A little gem of a book on the subject, one that I’ve used often in this course, is A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation (New York: Norton, 2006), by the esteemed literary agent Noah Lukeman. This document owes much to that fine and valuable book.

In the following sections, which will be assigned during the first weeks of the course, you will learn about how to use the punctuation marks that everyone takes for granted. I will assign sections and ask you to respond to exercises with thought and care in your Course Journal. Further, I will ask you to carry over this new rhetorical knowledge into your formal written work in the course. For example, many writers go through life thinking that it’s bad form to write a sentence fragment or to begin a sentence with a conjunction; as well, many writers feel somewhat uncomfortable about when and how to use the semicolon, colon, and dash (single or in pairs). During the course I will ask you specifically to do just these things in your writing.

Before we begin, two important caveats:

- Beware of overusing the most powerful special punctuation marks: the semicolon, colon, and dash. Your use of these should be reserved for special circumstances, and you should make a conscious decision when and why to use them. Always consider the stylistic effect of using these marks.

- As you compose papers for the course, always judge the effectiveness of your sentences within context—that is, not by themselves but within the frame of a larger prose unit such as the paragraph.

I. The Period

Lukeman likens the period to “the stop sign of the punctuation world. By providing a boundary, a period delineates a thought. Its presence divides and its absence connects. To employ it is to make
a statement; to leave it out, equally so. All other punctuation marks exist only to modify what lies between two periods—they are always restrained by it, and must act in context of it. To realize its power, simply imagine a book without any periods. Or one with a period after every word. Consequently, the period also sets the tone for style and pacing” (21; emphasis added). Your judicious use of the period governs the pace of your prose.

**The Short Sentence**

A “staccato” sentence may have the effect of “hooking” the reader or instilling a sense of suspense or drama. Think of Melville’s famous opening sentence to *Moby-Dick*: “Call me Ishmael.” This short sentence is in the imperative mood (a command, here tempered by a conversational tone) and is then followed by a series of much longer and more elaborate structures.

The short sentence tends to stand out and call attention to itself; that is why a skilled writer can deliver real impact through its (occasional) use. Consider the opening to the novel *Paul Clifford*: “It was a dark and stormy night.” (The author is Edward Bulwer-Lytton, not Snoopy, by the way.)

Generally speaking, short sentences tend to speed up the flow of the prose. However, the downside of prose that is heavily-laden with periods is that its tone and overall effect may seem “choppy.” The real test is to determine whether the sentence conveys enough thought on its own. As Lukeman notes, “One must be watchful for short sentences that, in context, convey little, are incomplete thoughts, and that are unsatisfying. Sentences mustn’t lean too heavily on one another, at least not without a purpose” (27).

**The Long Sentence**

The long, complex sentence, as in structures like the “periodic sentence” or “cumulative sentence,” is a staple of much academic writing. In theory at least, these sentences can be excellent—even necessary—for conveying a complete idea or thought, and writers of good academic prose need to learn to use them effectively. But often two, three, or more related short sentences can be combined successfully to achieve a more successful—because unified—whole.

Dangers lurk, however, when one undertakes to write long sentences. Perhaps the biggest of these comes from trying to force too many ideas into a single sentence. After composing such a sentence, ask yourself whether it needs to be broken into two parts in order to convey your idea with clarity. (A good way to do that is to carefully read the sentence aloud and hear how it sounds.) Think also about using other dividers, such as the semicolon, colon, or dash(es) to break up and set off elements of the long sentence. As with most things writerly, often the best time to do these things is during the revision process, when you will cast your astute and critical eye on each sentence individually and also in terms of its relationship to other sentences (context). Remember that a sentence may be considered long or short in relation to the sentences that surround it.

**II. The Comma**

Continuing his “traffic signals” metaphor for punctuation marks, Lukeman compares the comma to “the speed bump of the punctuation world. With its power to pause, the comma controls the ebb and flow of a sentence, its rhythm, its speed” (44). Other than the period, the most frequently used of all punctuation marks, the comma is the one that relies most on personal interpretation;
but because there are few distinct rules regarding its use, the comma frequently is misused. Here are a number of functions of the comma:

**As Divider**

As a divider, “the comma can control meaning itself, since the same sentence cut in different ways takes on entirely new meaning” (Lukeman 44; see also below, “Comma in a Series”). The title of the British best-seller by Lynne Truss is a good example: *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003). Interpreting the title as about someone firing a gun in a restaurant and then leaving would be natural because of the comma placement (although in American usage there should be another comma in the series, after “Shoots”; see below, “Comma in a Series”). But if the comma after “Eats” is omitted, thus forming *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, we can easily imagine that the book is about pandas.

**As Connector**

A series of brief but related ideas may be combined into one sentence that forms a more pleasing structure. For example: “I entered the classroom. I opened my backpack. I took out my textbook.” Using commas as connectors smooths out the choppiness of these staccato sentences: “I entered the classroom, opened my backpack, and took out my textbook.” **Note:** Important to the success of this sentence is the writer’s understanding of syntactic parallelism: all verbs are in the same case and they match up with the implied subject, “I.”

**To Provide Clarity**

A sentence trying to communicate several ideas absolutely requires the strategic placement of commas to avoid being misunderstood. The comma allows readers to pause and take in information as it is being released by the writer. Note the difference a comma makes in the following example (Lukeman 46):

> She told me I looked like an old boyfriend of hers then turned and walked away.

> She told me I looked like an old boyfriend of hers, then turned and walked away.

**To Pause**

The comma is the perfect mark to allow your readers to catch their breaths. Read the following passage (Lukeman 47) and imagine how it would be improved with the strategic placement of commas:

> He raised his rifle cocked it adjusted his neck and had the deer in his sights but when he went to pull the trigger his hand started shaking again just like it had every day for the last two weeks or maybe three he couldn’t be sure.

**To Establish Meaning or Offset an Idea**

Note how commas affect meaning in the following examples:

- The windows with the glass treatment are holding up well.
  
  The windows, with the glass treatment, are holding up well.
• Taking medicine and eating well coupled with exercise can help assure a healthy life.

Taking medicine and eating well, coupled with exercise, can help assure a healthy life.

**Overuse of the Comma**

As Lukeman aptly notes, “the main way writers misuse the comma is to *overuse* it. If there is anything worse than a work bereft of commas, it is one drowning in them” (53). Lots of commas slow the pace of your writing, and sometimes a sentence may work with or without commas. That is, to a certain extent the use (or non-use) of commas is a matter of personal stylistics—and prose style is always evolving. Regarding the comma, my middle school English and Latin teacher preached the following rule: “When in doubt, leave it out.” A good test of whether or not a comma is necessary is to read the sentence aloud; if you “hear” no natural pause as you do so, you may not need the comma.

**Context**

Wise words from Lukeman: “No punctuation mark acts alone; every time you decide to employ one—especially the comma, which often allows you the choice of including or omitting it—you must take into account the effect it will have on the marks preceding and following it. For instance, when you use a comma, you lessen the effect of the period and semicolon. The comma steals the limelight. It slows the reader dramatically, and thus the stop sign [period] no longer has such great impact” (62-63).

**Comma in a Series**

When you have a list of three or more items conjoined by a conjunction, *insert a comma before the conjunction.* For example, “red, white and blue” would be incorrect for U.S. writers, and should be written “red, white, **and** blue.” Work on developing an eye for these minor, yet important, details in your writing. Lots of them will add up and pull down the overall quality of your writing.

**III. The Semicolon**

Some writers seem to have a fear of the semicolon, probably because they are unsure of exactly what it is or how to use it. That may be because their former teachers, including some high school AP teachers, often don’t know how to use it themselves, much less teach it; unfortunately, students under their tutelage basically are taught *not* to do things or that they *can’t* do things with sentences—without being given explanations why. That’s a great pity, since the semicolon is a powerful stylistic mark; its presence tends to indicate that the writer is relatively advanced, skilled, and sophisticated. Neither a period nor a comma, the semicolon nonetheless shares properties with both of those marks; indeed, Mike Markel, author of *Technical Communication*, now in its ninth edition, refers to the semicolon as a “supercomma.” Lukeman thinks of the semicolon as a “mediator”: “The primary function of the semicolon is to connect two complete (and thematically similar) sentences, thereby making them one” (69).

**Important:** Like the colon and dash, the semicolon is an *optional* punctuation mark; that is, one needn’t ever use it, as other marks also could work perfectly well. As we will see, in many cases the solo dash or even colon can substitute for the semicolon; the choice is yours, and should be governed by the stylistic effect you are striving to achieve.
For Lukeman, “The semicolon is a powerful tool in the writer’s arsenal. It is probably the most
elegant of all forms of punctuation . . . , and can offer an excellent solution to balancing sentence
length and rhythm. . . . The semicolon elevates punctuation from the *utilitarian* (from punctuation
that works) to the *luxurious* (to punctuation that transcends)” (70; emphasis added). The
semicolon is a great tool for joining together fairly short, related sentences; its use smoothes out
choppiness in a paragraph. Further, it tends to call the reader’s attention to the *language*.

The semicolon, like other special and powerful marks, should be used in moderation. To
paraphrase Lukeman, it’s easy to become a “semicolon junkie.” Remember that all punctuation
marks should be evaluated for their effects within the context of a substantial stretch of writing (a
full paragraph, for example).

**Requirements for Use**

Using the semicolon is actually rather easy once one knows the two requirements:

1. On either side of the semicolon there must be a complete sentence, which is defined as a
   grammatical structure having a [subject] and [verb].

   Subject + Verb ; Subject + Verb.

2. The second sentence must *somehow relate to, comment on, or extend the thought*
present in the first sentence.

**Example of Correct Use of the Semicolon**

For the first two acts of the play, Hamlet feigns madness in order to verify the Ghost’s story
and come up with a plan for revenge; this supposed “delay” comes to fruition in act 3, scene 2,
when Hamlet stages a play that he has rewritten, *The Murder of Gonzazo*, in order to “catch the
conscience o’ the king.”

*Comment*: Note that the second half of the sentence furthers the build-up established in the first
half. This is a seamless match.

**Example of Incorrect Use of the Semicolon**

Along with the aftermath of the earthquake in Japan, the Casey Anthony trial, and the Murdoch
hacking scandal, the nation’s debt ceiling crisis dominated much of the summer’s news;
Jarrod’s favorite late-night snack is a triple Smashburger.

*Comment*: Each half of this sentence makes perfect sense in terms of grammar and syntax. The
problem is that the second half does not fulfill the second requirement for using the semicolon (see
above).

**A Common Problem Remedied by Using the Semicolon**

The power outage affected all parts of the town, no one knew when it would be restored.

*Comment*: This structure is called a *comma splice*—a major sentence error—because two clauses
(subject + verb) are yoked together with a comma; that’s very bad (unless you’re James Baldwin).
There are three ways to fix this problem: one could insert a period in place of the comma; the
writer could subordinate the second clause to the first by inserting the conjunction *and* following
the comma; or, one could replace the comma with the semicolon.
The power outage affected all parts of the town; no one knew when it would be restored.

*Comment:* Note how this structure fulfills the two requirements for using the semicolon.

**Use of Plural Semicolons**

Once you have mastered the most basic use of the semicolon, you now may take that skill further—and have some fun in doing so. A given sentence may have more than one semicolon; that is, it may have three or more clauses. The rules for using the semicolon (see above) still apply, however. Consider the following example from *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), by N. Scott Momaday, whose work is a virtual “laboratory” for style:

Mutton sizzled and smoked above the fires; fat dripped into the flames; there were great black pots of strong coffee and buckets full of fried bread; dogs crouched on the rim of the light, the many circles of light; and old men sat hunched in their blankets on the ground, in the cold shadows, smoking, giving almost nothing—only a vague notion—of themselves away.

*Comment:* The sentence has five parts separated by a series of semicolons. If Momaday had chosen to use periods instead (and it’s doubtful that he would have), the result would have been a series of annoyingly choppy clauses—except for the last sentence, which could stand on its own. Why, then, did Momaday consciously choose to use semicolons to craft this beautiful, evocative description? I would argue that in the passage he is attempting to paint a verbal picture, the focus of which is at the end of the sentence, on the old men; while they are sitting together, it seems as though they are individually very cautious and self-protective. The sentence gradually builds, using a series of details (almost like a moving camera) to the observation on the men at the end, which is made more vivid with a phrase set off by a pair of dashes. In other words, the effect of using semicolons here is *cumulative,* with the image of the men gradually coming into focus.

The Momaday example was taken from a work of nonfiction prose. Here’s an example of an academic use of multiple semicolons from an article recently published by your instructor:

Of course, romanticized stereotypes of American Indian sexualities, eroticized by desire and fear, long had been staples of American literature: the noble savage of Fenimore Cooper balanced against the despoiler of white women featured in countless captivity narratives; Pocahontas, depicted either as princess or squaw; the fatal attraction of miscegenation at the center of dime novels like Ann Sophia Stephens’s *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860); and the anxieties located in the (temporary) homoerotic attraction of manly white cowboys to ambiguously attired Indian braves in numerous poems, ballads, and stories of the Old West.

*Comment:* What was I thinking, you might ask, in writing such a long sentence—indeed, the longest sentence in the entire article? Similar to Momaday, I basically was trying to build a cumulative set of observations that develop and support the topic sentence beginning with “Of course” and leading up to the colon. The colon then signals a list, and I’m off to the races with four clauses divided by semicolons. In other words, the sentence is long *on purpose*; note also the *parallelism* among the clauses.

Here’s another example of an academic use of plural semicolons:
Students often come to *Hamlet* with a number of misconceptions that must be dispelled through a close reading of the text. First, Ophelia does not reject Hamlet’s “love” (in fact, he quite forcefully rejects *her*, perhaps as an impediment to his fatal plan of revenge); second, Hamlet is never in his mother’s “bedroom,” despite all the psychoanalytic criticism (his major scene with her, in act 3, scene 4, is the apex of the play and occurs in her “closet”—what today we might call her sitting room); third, Ophelia does not commit suicide, but in her madness falls into the brook, the weight of her clothing absorbing water and dragging her down to her death.

*Comment:* The intention and effect here is very similar to the example given just before.

**Some Final Remarks from Lukeman**

Keep in mind that a semicolon takes the pause effect away from a nearby comma, and takes the stop effect away from a nearby period. When the semicolon connects, the comma becomes less important; when it divides, the period seems less meaningful. Commas and periods do have a power of their own. Their effect can be lost when too many (or ill-placed) semicolons come onto the scene. And there might be times when you want the impact to fall on the comma or period. Even though the semicolon can work in any given circumstance, it doesn’t mean it should. Always be mindful of its stealing the limelight. (83-84)

**IV. The Colon**

Like the dash and parentheses, the colon adds style to a given sentence. As Lukeman writes, “The primary function of the colon is to flag something as important, whether it’s a revelation, summary, conclusion, or a point that needs to be offset. The colon is a giant red flag” (106). Hence, the need to use it judiciously: “Colons are stylistic, and demand the text around them to be stylized. Use them sparingly. If more than one or two appear per page you are probably overdoing it and should find a way to reduce them or, preferably, *reconstruct your sentences in a way where the arc is inherent*” (100; emphasis added). In other words, the use of the colon (and the other specialized marks) should be considered within overall context; “As with all punctuation, the need to use the colon must be organic to the text. . . . A colon must never be forced to do the job of content. If a sentence is inherently dramatic, often a colon won’t be needed; and when it is needed, it must flow seamlessly into the rhythm of the sentence” (103; emphasis added). The following is a brief discussion of how the colon may be used.

**To Reveal or Offset a Point**

Here, the colon works almost like curtains in a theater. The writer’s main point is what follows after the colon; these are the words the reader is most likely to remember. To use the colon in this way, construct your sentence so that it builds naturally to a climax; what follows after the colon is the revelation.

I grabbed my bag, put on my coat, and stepped out the door: I wasn’t coming back. (92)

Claudius’ reaction to the play-within-the-play confirmed Hamlet’s suspicions: now he must act.
**To Enhance Word Economy**

Used sparingly, this technique “tightens” your prose by making it more economical. An example from Lukeman (93):

I’ve been meaning to tell you something, and that is that I’m pregnant.

I’ve been meaning to tell you something: I’m pregnant.

Note the different effects achieved by the punctuation in these sentences. The second version is highly dramatic, and the colon serves to throw a spotlight on the simple clause that follows. Here there is a definite sense of *pause* created by the punctuation.

**To Summarize**

Here’s another good example from Lukeman (94):

The parlor was immense, the kitchen spectacular, the two billiard rooms offered a water view, and the six fireplaces were always lit: it was a palace.

Here, the sentence builds to the big point by using a series of parallel clauses offset with commas. The effect is cumulative. Note that one could actually reverse the sentence:

It was a palace: the parlor was immense, the kitchen spectacular, [and so forth].

Now the point that was revealed gradually in the first version is foregrounded, and the ensuing list of details works to elucidate the main point. Either version works, and this is where the writer’s conscious decision to choose one or the other is important, especially within a larger context. **Note:** Semicolons could substitute for commas in the descriptive clauses:

The parlor was immense; the kitchen spectacular; the two billiard rooms . . . [and so forth].

**Misuse of the Colon**

As with the semicolon, the two parts of a sentence separated by a colon must share a relationship: “A colon should connect two clauses only when such connection is crucial, for instance, when one clause reveals or summarizes the other. If the text after a colon reveals, then the text preceding it must build to that revelation. The clauses cannot be unrelated, or too independent. If so, they must be divided into two separate sentences” (100).

**Bad Example**

My grandfather shot squirrels in his spare time: I didn’t do my homework yesterday.

**Good Example**

My grandfather shot squirrels in his spare time: he loved to kill anything that moved.

Note that the *semicolon* or *period* could have substituted for the colon:

My grandfather shot squirrels in his spare time; he loved to kill anything that moved.

My grandfather shot squirrels in his spare time. He loved to kill anything that moved.
**Good Places to Use the Colon**

Two places to use the colon to great effect in academic writing are the Introduction and Conclusion to a paper. For example, the colon might be a good punctuation choice to give your thesis statement added emphasis. For the same reason, it tends to have summational impact in a paper’s conclusion. Construct such sentences carefully, taking into account the “arc” of the sentence and its rhythm. Remember always that the colon is a very powerful mark and should be used sparingly. A sentence containing a colon should almost pop off the page.

**V. The Dash (Single and Double) and Parentheses**

The dash, whether solo or double, interrupts the flow of a sentence; that is, it slows down the pace of the prose rather than speeds it up (“dash” here doesn’t denote speed, but rather a “smashing” or “breaking”). Lukeman thinks of it as “perhaps the most aggressive of all punctuation marks” (111), and it is a valuable addition to your writer’s toolbox. The solo dash always occurs at the end of a sentence and, like the colon (for which it can substitute), it places emphasis on what follows.

The nurses seemed caring, the doctors concerned—but it was murder nonetheless.

Writers during the past couple of centuries tended to use parentheses frequently (often, excessively), but not so today. Now, an overuse of parentheses tends to “clog” the flow of one’s prose and soon irritates readers. Generally, the effect of enclosing material within parentheses is that of a gentler interruption, as opposed to the direct and forceful interruption that comes with using the double dash. My undergraduate writing mentor positively loathed parentheses, saying that they tend to “hide” material; basically, she wanted us to recast the sentence in a way that obviated the need for using parentheses. I tend to follow that advice generally, though there are times when parentheses are definitely useful. Too, they don’t interrupt the flow of a sentence as boldly as do double dashes.

As you may have surmised by now, the comma, colon, dash, and parentheses sometimes may be substituted for one another, depending on the stylistic effect you are trying to achieve. Of dashes and parentheses, Lukeman explains that “They are both interrupters; they both propel their subjects into the spotlight; are both used to digress, elucidate, or explain; and they perform a nearly identical function when the dash is used in pairs. To consider these marks separately . . . is a mistake. Not only do they perform overlapping functions, but we learn more about each by holding them side by side” (112).

Like the semicolon and colon, the use of dashes (solo or double) and parentheses can enliven and transform your writing, especially if it seems too simplistic or straightforward.

**Examples**

Study the following sentences (based on Lukeman 113, 115, 116) in terms of the effects created by the punctuation. Note how the use of the dash/dashes makes the material stand out more prominently than pairs of commas or parentheses.

- Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest, some say in the Southwest, too, in the 1800s.
  
  Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest (some say in the Southwest, too), in the 1800s.
Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest in the 1800s—some say in the Southwest, too.

Buffaloes roamed freely in the Midwest—some say in the Southwest, too—in the 1800s.

- Small windows let in less sunlight but, assuming it’s winter, save you money on your heating bill.

Small windows let in less sunlight but (assuming it’s winter) save you money on your heating bill.

Small windows let in less sunlight but—assuming it’s winter—save you money on your heating bill.

- The Christmas tree business, and it is a business, is a multibillion-dollar one.

The Christmas tree business (and it is a business) is a multibillion-dollar one.

The Christmas tree business—and it is a business—is a multibillion-dollar one.

**How to Type the Dash**

Do not confuse the dash with the *hyphen*, which is much shorter and used mainly to form compound adjectives such as “blue-black,” “wild-eyed,” ”meat-and-potatoes,” and so forth.

Dashes come in two sizes: the “en-dash” (“en” is how the letter “N” is spelled), which is useful for separating dates, e.g., “1910–1912” (note the difference when one uses the hyphen: “1910-1912”); and the ”em-dash” (“em” is how the letter “M” is spelled), which is the largest of the three and the one you want to use in your writing. (There are no spaces before or after the dash or dashes.)

To create an em-dash in Word—likely the software program you use—is easy. Go to “Insert,” then “Symbol,” then “General Punctuation.” There you will see the en-dash and em-dash; select and insert. **Good idea:** Note the “Shortcut Key” on the General Punctuation Subset drop-down menu. That allows you to create a “toggle” switch key for any special punctuation mark or symbol. For example, on my PC I have a shortcut for the em-dash (Ctrl > M) and another for the en-dash (Ctrl > N). These are so convenient, so consider setting them up.