

Lesson Plan: Advanced punctuation

Level	Advanced (C1–C2)
Time	60–90 minutes
Skills	Writing
Focus	Em dashes; colons; semicolons; parentheses; Oxford comma; ellipsis in formal writing

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Use the em dash, colon, and semicolon with precision and confidence
- Understand when parentheses are more appropriate than em dashes or commas
- Use the Oxford comma correctly and understand the debate around it
- Apply advanced punctuation to improve the rhythm and clarity of written English

TARGET LANGUAGE & EXAMPLES

The semicolon (;)

- Joins two closely related independent clauses: The report was detailed; the conclusions were unclear.
- In lists where items already contain commas: We visited Paris, France; Rome, Italy; Berlin, Germany.
- Do NOT use before a conjunction: She was tired; and she left. ✗ → She was tired, and she left.

The colon (:)

- Introduces a list: The package contained three items: a pen, a notebook, and a card.
- Introduces an explanation: There was one problem: nobody had booked the venue.
- Before a quotation in formal writing: The report concluded: 'Further research is required.'

The em dash (—)

- Adds emphasis or interruption: The result — a 40% drop — shocked everyone.
- Replaces colon informally: There was one thing on her mind — money.
- Can replace parentheses for dramatic effect: She finally told me — after six months of silence.

Oxford comma and ellipsis

- Oxford comma: the comma before 'and'/'or' in a list: red, white, and blue (with Oxford comma)
- AmE style guides often require it; BrE often omit it. Critical in legal/formal documents.
- Ellipsis (...): shows omitted text in a quotation, or a trailing thought in creative writing.

Meaning & Nuance

Mark	Use	Example	Common error
semicolon	join related independent clauses	The data was clear; the interpretation was not.	Using before a conjunction (and/but/or)
colon	introduce explanation or list	There were two options: stay or leave.	Used after 'such as' or 'including' — incorrect

em dash	emphatic interruption/expansion	The solution — if there was one — was complex.	Using a hyphen (-) instead of em dash (—)
parentheses	non-essential information	The study (published in 2022) confirmed this.	Using for truly essential information

LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up: Spot the error (10 min)

Task: 8 sentences with punctuation errors. Students identify and correct them.

- Include: wrong semicolon before conjunction, colon misused, missing em dash.

→ *Diagnostic: reveals what students already know.*

2. Presentation (20 min)

Task: Each mark: what it does, when to use it, when not to.

- Em dash: the most underused mark in learner writing. Spend extra time here.
- Oxford comma: the famous 'We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin' example.

3. Rewriting for punctuation (20 min)

Task: Students add appropriate advanced punctuation to flat sentences.

- 'There were three problems. The budget was too small. The timeline was unrealistic. The team was understaffed.'

→ *Semicolons, colon, em dash — discuss which works best and why.*

4. Edit own work (20 min)

Task: Students apply advanced punctuation to their own previous writing.

- Identify: places where a semicolon, colon, or em dash would improve clarity or impact.
- Share improvements with a partner.

TEACHER NOTES

- Advanced punctuation is a genuine C1/C2 skill gap — most learners default exclusively to commas and full stops.
- The Oxford comma controversy has real-world legal implications — a great discussion trigger.

EXTENSION / HOMEWORK

Choose one or more:

1. Rewrite a paragraph using at least one semicolon, one colon, and one em dash.
2. Find 5 examples of each advanced punctuation mark in formal writing and explain their function.
3. Write a 150-word paragraph that deliberately uses all four marks taught in this lesson.