

## Grade 8 Playlist: Using Punctuation to Indicate Pauses and Breaks

*Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.2.A*

- Use punctuation (comma, ellipsis, dash) to indicate a pause or break.

### Welcome

“We were quietly reading in the living room, and then the fire alarm sounded.” “We were quietly reading in the living room . . . and then the fire alarm sounded.” “We were quietly reading in the living room—and then the fire alarm sounded.” These three sentences use different punctuation to indicate a pause in the text. Which one is correct? Depending on the tone that the author wants to develop in the text, any one of them can be.

### Objective

In this playlist, the student will learn and practice how to:

- use commas, ellipses, and dashes to indicate pauses and breaks in a text.

### Review

#### Key Terms

- A **comma** is one of the most important punctuation marks. It is placed in a sentence to indicate a pause—not as final as a sentence, but just a brief stop where the reader or speaker can catch their breath. While commas have many uses, their main purposes are:
  - To separate two independent clauses in a compound sentence.
  - To set off clauses or phrases in a sentence that are not necessary to the meaning of the sentence.
  - To set off geographical names, items in dates, addresses, and titles in names.
  - To separate items in a list within a sentence, such as adjectives used to describe a noun.
- An **ellipsis** (plural: ellipses) is a series of evenly spaced periods that is placed in a sentence to indicate that some of the words in a sentence have been omitted.
- A **dash** is a line written in the middle of a line of text that is used to indicate a break in a sentence. Dashes resemble hyphens but are longer. Unlike commas, they imply a quick and abrupt change in thought.



## Exploring the Standard

This lesson will be exploring how to indicate a pause or a break in a text. Commas are perfectly fine for setting off most types of elements in a sentence, but in other cases ellipses and dashes are better choices. When the pause or break is the result of text being omitted or a thought being unfinished, an ellipsis should be used. Dashes are used in instances where a very abrupt change in thought or tone is present, such as when an element interrupts the flow of the text.

### A Closer Look: Commas

As one of the most versatile of all punctuation marks, the comma has many uses. One of them is to set off material that is not essential to the text. Consider the following sentences. Why do they need or not need commas?

- *Bryan has been my best friend since the fourth grade and is always there for me.* This sentence does not need any commas or other punctuation to indicate a break. The facts that Bryan has been the speaker's best friend since the fourth grade and that he is always there for the speaker are equally important, and nothing in this sentence can be removed without changing its meaning.
- *Bryan, my best friend since the fourth grade, is always there for me.* This sentence does need commas to indicate pauses. The main idea in this sentence is that Bryan is always there for his best friend. The fact that they have been best friends since the fourth grade is a detail that is not necessary to the understanding of this main idea. Since the material that needs to be set off is in the middle of the sentence, two commas are used.
- *My best friend since the fourth grade, Bryan is always there for me.* This sentence also has material that should be set off with a comma. In this case, however, only one comma is needed because the material is not in the middle of the sentence.

### Watch!

This video further explains using commas to indicate pauses and breaks:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mkij-oHnAI>

### A Closer Look: Dashes

Commas are usually appropriate for indicating a pause or a break in a sentence—but wait a minute! What if the punctuation needed is not so much to indicate a pause, where the speaker or author has to take a breath before continuing, but a change in direction for the sentence?

If the pause or break changes the structure of the sentence or indicates a change so abrupt that it seems to interrupt the sentence's train of thought, a dash—or two—should be used.

- *In 1995—years before I was born—my parents moved into the house where we live today.* The fact that 1995 was years before the author was born is not only unnecessary to communicate the sentence's main idea but it also seems to interrupt the main idea. These words can be left out of the sentence, or they can be included if they are set off with two dashes. By using these dashes, the material within the sentence is emphasized.



## Teaching Notes: Using Punctuation to Indicate Pauses and Breaks

This playlist discusses which types of punctuation should be used to indicate breaks and pauses in sentences. Students should be able to identify where such breaks and pauses are found and how to determine which type of punctuation should be used, if any.

### How Punctuation Affects Tone

If students have difficulty determining which type of punctuation should be used in a sentence, suggest that they sound it out to determine the tone. Commas are usually used when the tone is neutral or formal. Ellipses and dashes are used with less formal text. Sometimes, as in the example in the playlist's Welcome, any punctuation can be used, but the tone is affected by the choice. Provide students with the following handout:

- *We were quietly reading in the living room, and then the fire alarm sounded.* The use of a comma in this sentence suggests neutral feelings about the fire alarm going off. Most people might think that the sound of a fire alarm would be frightening, but if the speaker knew that it was only a drill or thought that it had gone off in error, they would not be likely to overreact.
- *We were quietly reading in the living room . . . and then the fire alarm sounded.* The use of an ellipsis in this sentence suggests suspense or hesitation. During the brief pause in this sentence, the author wants the reader to ask the question, "But what happened next?"
- *We were quietly reading in the living room—then the fire alarm sounded.* The use of a dash in this sentence suggests that everything happened very suddenly. Just as the additional thought has interrupted this sentence, the sound of the fire alarm interrupted the readers in the living room. This abruptness created a less suspenseful tension than the ellipsis.

Read and repeat the following sentence to the class: *The front door was locked, but the key under the doormat was missing.* Ask the students how the use of a comma to indicate a pause in this sentence affects the sentence's tone. Then, discuss how the sentence's tone would be different if an ellipsis or dash were used in its place. If this sentence were the first line of a short story, which type of story would use each form of punctuation in its first sentence?

### Additional Teaching Resources

- Commas:
  - <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/commas/>
  - <https://www.hamilton.edu/writing/writing-resources/comma-rules>
  - <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>
- Ellipses and dashes:
  - <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/ellipsis.htm>
  - <https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Dashes.html>

