

## Dos and Don'ts: Quick Guide to Message Unit Boundaries

There are no hard and fast rules for segmenting utterances into message units. Instead there are some strong tendencies that recur. Furthermore, some of the guidelines below overlap.

1. Avoid message units longer than about 7 words. Break them up if you can.

“Whenever I get really homesick for rosemary sweet potatoes | I call Mother.”

☛ “Whenever I get really homesick | for rosemary sweet potatoes | I call Mother.”

We break up long strings like this by pausing at major grammatical units. But the guideline to pause at major grammatical units is too sweeping by itself to be of practical value. However, bad examples are usually helpful:

2. Don't pause to break apart: Examples: Keep parts together

☛ an article from the noun

☛ short modifiers from what is modified

    an adjective from the noun

    an adverb from an adjective or adverb

☛ a preposition from its object

☛ parts of a verb phrase

    auxiliary or modal from verb head

    verb head from particles

I don't have any cookies.

The three, blind mice ran away very quickly,

dashing under the furniture.

We should have asked him first.

I'm looking forward to the trip.

Specific instances of the general principle of pausing at grammatical boundaries are even more helpful:

3. Pause after a long subject.

“The horseman's long, dark cape | flowed behind him.”

But keep short subjects with their predicates.

“The ambassador made an unexpected trip | to consult with his staff.”

4. Separate a prepositional phrase of four or more words from a longer string.

“Our route took us to the coast | through a pass in the mountains.”

But keep a short prepositional phrase with the rest of the phrase.

“The boy with him (|) is my cousin.”

5. Pause before conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *but*) joining simple sentences.

“She took the package | but she looked at me strangely.”

But keep the same parts of speech together that are joined with conjunctions.

“All they wanted to do | was to run and play.”

“You’re comparing apples and oranges.”

4. Pause between dependent and independent clauses

“The price was so low | we decided to buy it | even though we couldn’t afford it.”

“I saw my sister | looking at herself in the mirror.”

“He’s always wanted | to be well respected.”

“I never knew | (that) you were a swimmer.”

“Since he invited us | we had to go.”

Punctuation can be helpful in some instances to suggest where to make a message unit boundary. This is because punctuation usually corresponds to major grammatical units. But there are two problems with punctuation. First, the examples, “the three, blind mice” and “the horseman’s long, dark cape” (examples from above), illustrate that punctuation is not always a good guide. In these cases, we keep together parts that are separated by commas. Second, as the majority of examples above illustrate, there is no punctuation where a message unit boundary goes.