



# Commas

Commas are by far the most misused form of punctuation in college writing. To beginning writers, comma placement can seem arbitrary, but this is a misconception. The basic function of the comma is to separate parts of sentences; therefore, once sentence structure is understood, using commas correctly is only a matter of remembering the comma rules listed below. Correct comma usage is important because it accurately guides the reader through the sentence. Incorrect comma usage can confuse the reader.

**Rule 1: Use Commas After Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses.**

A sentence often requires a word, phrase, or clause before the main idea in order to indicate cause and effect, time, contrast, or a transition of some kind. The comma will indicate the boundary between the introductory part of the sentence and the main idea.

**Example:** *Furthermore*, Pablo didn't even like to eat vegetables.

Often times this introductory element is a dependent (subordinate) clause—a word group with a subject and verb that *cannot* stand on its own and, therefore, *depends* on being linked with the independent clause to form a complete thought. You can spot when a sentence begins with a dependent clause because dependent clauses always start with a subordinating word (see our *Fragments* handout for a list of subordinating words).

**Example:** *Because traffic was heavy*, Carol was late for work.

**Rule 2: Use Commas to Set Apart Non-essential Words, Phrases, and Clauses.**

A sentence often includes more than a main idea. Words, phrases, and clauses of nonessential information sometimes follow the main idea and sometimes appear within the main idea. Commas mark the boundaries between the main idea and non-essential information when it interrupts the main idea.

**Example:** Oranges, *which I eat daily*, have lots of vitamin C.

To test whether a sentence element is non-essential, ask yourself if the meaning of the main idea changes if that sentence element is removed. If it can be removed without affecting the main idea, as in the above example, then it is non-essential.

**Rule 3: Use Commas Paired with Coordinating Conjunctions to Join Independent Clauses.**

When two independent clauses are connected with only a coordinating conjunction, a comma needs to be placed before that conjunction for the sentence to be punctuated correctly. The seven coordinating conjunctions can be remembered by the acronym **FANBOYS**: **F**or, **A**nd, **N**or, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, **S**o.

**Example:** The game was over, *but* the crowd refused to leave.

To test whether the comma is needed, ask yourself if the portions of the sentence on either side of the conjunction are independent clauses. Remember, an independent clause has a subject, a verb, presents a complete thought and, therefore, can stand alone as a complete sentence. If the sentence does consist of two or more independent clauses, then you must use a comma as well as a conjunction to join them together, as in the example above. If the sentence consists of only one clause containing two verbs, no comma is needed, as in the example below.

**Example:** The crowd was large and refused to leave.

**Rule 4: Use Commas to Separate Three or More Words, Phrases, or Clauses Written in a Series.**

**Example:** The president promised to lower the deficit, protect natural resources, and reduce crime.

**Example:** In the evening, I usually drink a cup of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate.

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**Rule 5: Use Commas Near the End of a Sentence to separate Contrasted Coordinate Elements or to indicate a distinct shift.**

**Example:** He was very funny, even hilarious.

**Example:** The monkey seemed intelligent, almost human.

**Rule 6: Use Commas to Set Off Geographical Names, Items in Dates, and Titles in Names.**

**Example:** Birmingham, Alabama, is a beautiful city.

**Example:** January 21, 1960, was the worst day of his life.

**Example:** George Roberts, M.D., will be performing the surgery.

**Rule 7: Use Commas to Shift Between the Identifying Clause and a Quotation.**

**Example:** Franky said, "I'll be back by Sunday."

**Example:** "I was told," she said, "that Los Angeles is a beautiful city."

**Rule 8: Use Commas Whenever Necessary to Prevent Possible Confusion or Misreading.**

**Example:** To Michael, Douglas was a man to admire.

**Rule 9: Use Commas to Separate Two or More Equal Adjectives that Describe the Same Noun.**

**Example:** He was the tallest, most knowledgeable student in the class.

**Hint:** If you can put "and" between the adjectives or reverse their order, you need a comma.

**Rule 10: Use Commas Around the Name of a Person Spoken to (also Known as Direct Address).**

**Example:** Have you heard, Lou, that the concert already sold out?

#### **\*Comma Don'ts\***

**\*Don't use a comma to separate the subject from its verb.**

**Incorrect:** A famous baseball player, was arrested on drug charges.

**Correct:** A famous baseball player was arrested on drug charges.

**\*Don't put a comma between items in a series when there are only two items.**

**Incorrect:** The math teacher, and the soccer coach went to lunch.

**Correct:** The math teacher and the soccer coach went to lunch.

**\*Don't put a comma after the main clause (independent clause) when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it.**

**Incorrect:** She went to the store, because she wanted to buy cookies.

**Correct:** She went to the store because she wanted to buy cookies.

**\*Don't use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence.**

**Incorrect:** Students, who cheat, only harm themselves.

**Correct:** Students who cheat only harm themselves.

*You can tell that "who cheat" is essential, rather than non-essential because, if it were moved, the reader would not know which particular students harm themselves.*

**\*Don't use commas to join two independent clauses without also using a coordinating conjunction.**

**Incorrect:** Roger met his wife on a blind date, they got married only two weeks later.

**Correct:** Roger met his wife on a blind date, *and* they got married only two weeks later.

\*This handout was adapted from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.

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