

Comma Use

The comma is absolutely essential for correctly conveying ideas. Incorrectly used commas can completely change the writer's intended meaning and even result in serious consequences, as is clear in the second example below:

Let's eat, Grandpa! (the grandchildren are informing Grandpa they want to eat)

Let's eat Grandpa! (the grandchildren want to eat Grandpa)

The following general guidelines will help clear up some of the mystery surrounding comma usage:

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*. When joining two short clauses, there is no need for a comma, unless it is necessary for clarity.

The student attempted to start her research, *but* she was confused about the meaning of a scholarly source.

He left his assignment in school, *so* he could not complete his homework.

My puppy fell off the bed *and* we had a good laugh. (**no comma necessary**)

2. In general, use commas after introductory words that come before the main clause.

Although I bought the APA Publication Manual, I still could not understand how to cite a website.

As I was just walking out the door, the telephone rang.

Finally, we came up with a good name for our company.

3. Use commas to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are NOT essential to the meaning of the sentence. If the clause is in the middle of the sentence, use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause. To help you decide if the sentence element is not essential, leave out the clause, phrase, or word. If the basic meaning of the sentence can still be understood, the clause, phrase, or word is not essential.

Mr. Thompson, *who happens to live in the same town as I*, is overqualified for the clerk position.

We ran and ran, *desperately glancing backwards*, until we finally put a great distance between us and the king's henchman.

I would love to meet you for dinner any day this week. Friday, *however*, I cannot make it before 7:00 pm.

For the hike we need sturdy, waterproof shoes, *which are expensive*.

Transitional expressions like: *however, therefore, moreover, for example, and on the other hand* are usually set off by commas.

The roads in upstate country towns are less congested and, *therefore*, much easier to navigate for beginner drivers.

Exceptions:

- **When a transitional expression appears between independent clauses (two complete sentences), it is preceded by a semi-colon and usually followed by a comma.**

On the one hand, I was looking forward to attending the opera; *on the other hand*, I was not looking forward to making the trip into the city in the cold weather.

- **If the transitional expression blends smoothly with the rest of the sentence, requiring little or no pause in reading, it does not need to be set off with commas.**

The professor was *therefore* a bit too hasty in his judgment.

4. Do not use commas to set off elements of the sentence that are essential to the meaning of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with *that* (relative clauses).

***That* clauses after nouns are always essential.**

The letter *that I sent to you* contains information about his background.

For the hike we need sturdy shoes *that are waterproof*.

Essential elements are not always preceded by *that*.

Essential phrase: The employer placed the resumé of any candidate *who lied on his application* in the trash.

Note that the phrase “who lied on his application” is essential in identifying whose applications are being placed in the trash.

Non-essential phrase: The victim, *who was trembling with fear*, positively identified the man with the beard as her attacker.

Note that the description of the victim is non-essential to her being able to identify her attacker.

5. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

The flamenco dancer performed *solea por bulerias*, *fandango*, and *allegrias*.

The Writing Center helps students to *brainstorm ideas*, *organize their thoughts*, and *write well-structured and grammatical sentences*.

The performer *who displayed the most skill*, *who best connected with the audience*, and *who exhibited the most original style* received a standing ovation.

6. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives with equal ("co"-ordinate) status in describing the noun; neither adjective is subordinate to the other. You can decide if two adjectives in a row are coordinate by asking the following questions:

- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order? If yes, then use a comma.
- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with *and* between them? If yes, then use a comma?

The sleepy, hungry child whimpered for his breakfast.

The dilapidated ranch house was an ideal hangout for the hooligans. (**no comma necessary**)

7. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted elements or to indicate a distinct shift.

She was not disinterested in the professor's lecture, just too tired to focus.

The new physician determined that the child was deaf, not mentally challenged.

8. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

The Inklings, a group of writers and intellectuals of whom J.R. Tolkein and C.S. Lewis were members, used to meet regularly at a pub known as The Eagle and the Child on St. Giles Street, Oxford, England.

World famous for the first heart transplant, Christian Barnard, MD, was born on November 8, 1922, in South Africa.

She began working as an instructor on Monday, Mar 1, 2010.

When you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year.

I learned how to make beef *carpaccio* on my June 2010 culinary tour of southern Italy.

9. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation, by placing the comma inside the quotation marks.

"I certainly have not the talent which some people possess," said Darcy, "of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done."

"This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put," rejoined Winston Churchill when corrected for ending his sentence in a preposition.

10. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

All of the things I dreamed would happen, happened.

Those hikers who can, walk 10 miles over the hills.

11. Use a comma or commas to set off words of direct address, *yes* and *no*, mild interjections, and tag questions.

Madam, may I help you?

Yes, I have decided to stay home and read this weekend.

Of course, I am delighted to accept your invitation.

You are the one who clipped my car in the parking lot, aren't you?

Comma Misuse

Commas in the wrong places can break a sentence into illogical segments or confuse readers with unnecessary and unexpected pauses.

12. Don't use a comma to separate the subject from the verb.

Incorrect: Two important aspects of flamenco dancing, are rhythm and passion.

13. Don't put a comma between the two verbs or verb phrases in a compound predicate.

Incorrect: We packed the car with camping gear and food, and began our journey.

14. Don't put a comma between the two nouns, noun phrases, or noun clauses in a compound subject or compound object.

Incorrect (compound subject): The woman we saw homeless and sleeping in the street last year, and the actress in the Off-Broadway show we just saw are the same people.

Incorrect (compound object): Wanda warned me that the class was too difficult, and that it would be wiser to take it in the summer.

15. Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

Incorrect: The UPS man delivered the package, while I was at work. (**The comma use is incorrect because the dependent clause does not show extreme contrast.**)

Correct: She was still quite upset, even though she had won the Oscar. (**This comma use is correct because the dependent clause shows extreme contrast.**)

Parts of this handout were adapted from Hacker's *Rules for Writers*, Maimon et al.'s *Writing Intensive*, and OWL at Purdue.