

# How to Use Commas

The comma is a valuable, useful tool in a sentence because it helps the reader pause in the right places. The rules provided here are those found in traditional handbooks; however, in certain rhetorical contexts and for specific purposes, these rules may be broken.

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions:

And	Nor
But	So
For	Yet
Or	

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

2. Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come **BEFORE** the main clause.

Examples: Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.  
If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.

CLUE: Some common starter words for clauses:

	After	
	Although	
	As	
	Because	( <b>While I was eating</b> , the cat
	If	scratched at the door.)
	Since	
	When	
	While	
Phrases:	Verb + ing	( <b>Having finished the test</b> , he left the
		the room.)
	To + verb	( <b>To get a seat</b> , you'd better come early.)
	Long Prepositional phrase (over four words)	<b>After the test but before</b> lunch, I went jogging.)
Words:	Yes,	
	However,	( <b>Well</b> , perhaps he meant no harm.)
	Well,	

3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off phrases, clauses, and words which are not essential to the meaning 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.

CLUE: \*Can you leave out the clause, phrase, or word and still have the sentence make sense?

\*Does the non-essential clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?

\*Can you move the non-essential element around in the sentence?

\*Does the clause begin with "That"?

-THAT clauses after nouns are almost always essential.

Example: The book **that I borrowed from you** is excellent.

-THAT clauses which follow a verb expressing mental action are always essential.

She believes that. . .

He dreams that. . .

I contend that. . .

They wish that. . .

#### **Essential**

Apples **that are green** are usually called Granny Smith apples.

A student **who cheats** only harms himself.

The girl **wearing the tight sweater** is attracting a lot of attention.

#### **Non Essential**

Apples, **which are my favorite fruit**, are usually harvested in autumn.

Fred, **who often cheats**, is just harming himself.

Prof. Benson, **grinning from ear to ear**, announced that the exam will be tomorrow.

Tom, **the captain of the team**, was injured in the game.

It is up to you, **Jane**, to finish.

She was, **however**, too tired to make the trip.

Two hundred dollars, **I think**, is sufficient.

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

CLUE: \*Are the last two items in the series connected with either AND or OR?

Examples: She couldn't choose between John, Jim, or Joe.

The candidate promised to lower taxes, solve the energy shortage, and end unemployment.

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

CLUE: 1. Can the adjectives be written in reverse order? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.)

2. Can you add an AND between the adjectives? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.)

a greedy, stubborn child

a white frame house

a purple wool shawl

an easy, happy smile

6. Use commas near the end of the sentence to separate sharply contrasted coordinate elements in the sentence or to indicate a distinct voice pause.

He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

You're one of the senator's right-hand men, aren't you?

7. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence which refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. These phrases are free modifiers which can appropriately be placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence without causing confusion for the reader.

Nancy waved enthusiastically at her parents on the boat, laughing gaily in the process.

**Wrong:** Jane waved at Nancy, laughing gaily.

(Who is laughing, Jane or Nancy?)

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

Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name for Birmingham, England.

July 22, 1959 was a momentous day in his life.

Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington D. C.?

Donald B. Lake, M. D., will be the principal speaker.

9. Use commas after “he said,” etc. to set off direct quotations and after the first part of a quotation in a sentence.

John said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I was able,” she answered, “to complete the assignment.”

10. Use commas anywhere in the sentence to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

To John, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

## Comma Abuse

Commas in the wrong places can chop ideas into wrong pieces or confuse the reader with unnecessary pauses.

### **Do Not separate a subject for its verb!**

Wrong: The **eight-year-old** in California, **is** now considered an adult.

Wrong: The most important **attribute** of a ball player, **is** quick reflex actions.

### **Do Not put a comma between 2 verbs!**

Wrong: We **laid out** our music and snacks, and **began** to study.

Wrong: I **turned** the corner, and **ran** smack in to a patrol car.

### **Do Not put a comma before a dependent (or subordinate) clause when it comes after the main clause (except for extreme contrast).**

Wrong: She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken.

Wrong: You ought to see a doctor, if you are ill.

BUT, what happens if the order of the clauses in these sentence is reversed? See #2 on the first page.

EXTREME CONTRAST: She was still quite upset, although she won the Oscar.

# Proofreading for Commas

Listed here are suggested strategies which often work, though not in every class.

## Compound Sentence Commas

1. Skim your paper, looking for only the coordinating conjunctions.  
And                      Nor  
But                        So  
For                        Set  
Or
2. Stop at each of these words, and see whether there is an independent clause (a sentence) on either side of it.
3. If so, place a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

## Comma Splices

1. Skim your paper, stopping at every comma.
2. See whether you have an independent clause (sentence) on each end of the comma.
3. If so, change the sentence in one of the following ways:
  - add a coordinating conjunction after the comma
  - replace the comma with a semicolon
  - replace the comma with a period, question mark, or exclamation point and capitalize the first word of the second clause.

Comma splice: Americans speak too rapidly, this is a common complaint by for foreign vistors.

Correct: Americans speak too rapidly; this is a common complaint by foreign visitors.

## Introductory Commas

For introductory commas after dependent clauses, try this strategy:

1. Skim your paper, looking only at the first two or three words of each sentence.
2. Stop if one of these words is a dependent marker such as *because*, *when*, *if*, etc. (see the Writing Lab's IC/DC handout).
3. If necessary, place a comma before the first word of the independent clause.

Example: While I was writing, the phone rang.

For other introductory commas, use the following strategies:

1. Skim you paper, looking only at the first two or three words of each sentence.
2. Stop if the word or phrase
  - ends in *ing*
  - beings with *to*
  - begins with a preposition (*in*, *at*, *on*, etc.)
  - in an introductory word (*well*, *yes*, *moreover*, etc.)
3. Place a comma before the first word of the independent clause.

Example: To get a good grade, you should hand in all of your assignments.

1. Find the independent clause in each sentence.
2. You often need a comma after any word or phrase which precedes that clause. But watch out for coordinating clauses.

## Disruptive Commas

General Guidelines:

1. Go through the paper, stopping at each comma.
2. If the comma is not necessary for clarity or called for by a rule, get rid of it.

For disruptive commas between compound verbs or objects:

1. Skim your paper, stopping only at the coordinating conjunctions.  
And            Nor  
But            So  
For            Yet  
Or
2. Check to see whether there is an independent clause (sentence) on each side of the conjunction. If so, place a comma before the conjunction. If not place no comma before the conjunction.

Disruptive comma: They bought two pizzas, but ate only one.

Correct: They bought two pizzas but ate only one.

For disruptive commas between subjects and verbs:

1. Find the subject and verb in each of your sentences.
2. Make sure that you have not separated the subject from its verb with one comma. (It's often all right to have a pair of commas between a subject and verb, but rarely—if ever—is a single comma acceptable.)

Disruptive Comma between subject and verb: That man sitting in the train station, is the person I'm supposed to meet.

Correct: That man sitting in the train station is the person I'm supposed to meet.

## Series Commas

1. Skim your paper, stopping at the conjunctions *and* or *or*.
2. Check to see if these conjunctions link words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.
3. If so, place commas after each word, phrase, or clause in the series (except the last one, as demonstrated in the sentence—no comma after *clause*)

Example: People who are trying to reduce cholesterol in their diet avoid eggs, meat, and tropical oils.

## Non-essential Commas

1. Skim your paper, looking for a phrase or clause in each sentence that explains or gives more information about a word or phrase that comes before it.
2. If you can delete the phrase or clause and still keep the meaning, the phrase or clause is usually non-essential and needs two commas, one before and one after (unless the phrase or clause is at the end of the sentence).
3. As an alternate test for non-essential phrase or clause, try saying “by the way” before it. If that seems appropriate to the meaning the phrase or clause is probably non-essential.

Example: My aunt Edna, who moved to San Francisco last year, writes children’s stories.