

Commas



Adapted from *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th Edition, Contributors Dayne Sherman, Jayetta Slawson, Natasha Whitton, and Jeff Wiemelt, 2010, 422-443. Prepared by the Southeastern Writing Center. Last updated July, 2011.

Commas (,) are interrupters or signals to pause. Commas make a reader slow down and pay attention to the words and ideas they set off.

Rule 1 – Commas before a Coordinating Conjunction

Use a comma between two independent clauses. Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so*) that joins the two independent clauses.

Example: John and Mary went to the concert, and Jane and Sue went to the movies.

Rule 2 – Commas in a Series

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

Example: John went to the library, stopped at the store, and called Jack.

However, no commas are necessary when all of the items are connected by conjunctions.

Example: Mary is smart and clever and wise.

B. Place a comma between coordinate adjectives that precede a noun. Coordinate adjectives modify a noun equally. To determine whether adjectives are coordinate, try to reverse their order or put the word *and* between them. If the sentence still sounds natural, the adjectives are coordinate.

Example: The sergeant ordered a slow (and) cautious (and) orderly approach.
The sergeant ordered a slow, cautious, orderly approach.

Rule 3 – Commas after Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

A. Use a comma after introductory words, phrases, or clauses only if the sentence would be misread without it.

Example: **For the children outside**, the snow-covered hill seemed like a magical world. (comma needed to prevent misreading)
During the summer the classroom is stifling. (comma not needed)

B. Use a comma after a long prepositional phrase or after the final phrase in a succession of phrases.

Example: **During the last few seconds of the race**, the fans began to cheer wildly.
In the heat of the day on the stroke of noon, John's eyes narrowed, and he stared out at the blazing desert.

However, do not use a comma if the phrase is immediately followed by a verb.

Example: **In the middle of the crowded room** stood a small group of young children.

C. Use commas to set off verbal phrases.

Example: **Barking**, the dog advanced toward the crowd.

Appealing to the teacher, Mary asked for an extension on the assignment.

D. Use commas to set off introductory subordinate clauses. Subordinate clauses are signaled by words such as *although*, *if*, *when*, *because*, *as*, *after*, *before*, *since*, *unless*, and *while*.

Example: **Although he studied all night**, John failed the biology test.

Before you sign the loan documents, make sure you read and understand the loan terms.

Rule 4 – Commas and Nonrestrictive Elements

A. Use commas to set off nonessential participles, infinitives, and their phrases. Do not set off essential phrases.

Example: **Waving**, the children ran toward us. (nonessential – The action of **waving** is not essential to the meaning or clarity of the sentence.)

The girl **waving to my mother** is my niece. (essential – The action of **waving** identifies the girl. Waving is essential to the meaning and clarity of the sentence.)

B. Use commas to set off nonessential relative clauses introduced by *who*, *whom*, or *which*. Do not set off essential clauses.

Example: Savannah, **which is a major city in Georgia**, is a historically rich city. (nonessential – The adjective clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.)

The men **who work in the mine** will go on strike next week. (essential – The adjective clause identifies who the **men** are. It is essential to the meaning and clarity of the sentence.)

C. Use commas to set off nonessential appositive phrases. Do not set off essential appositives.

Example: My sister, **Sarah**, loves flowers. (nonessential – The writer has only one sister.)

My sister **Sarah** loves flowers. (essential – The writer has more than one sister.)

D. Use commas to set off interjections (such as *oh* and *well*) and parenthetical expressions (such as *on the other hand* and *without a doubt*).

Example: **Oh**, I can hardly wait!

Last semester, **on the other hand**, you could have completed the required courses.

E. Use commas after conjunctive adverbs (such as *consequently*, *nevertheless*, *however*, and *therefore*) at the beginning of sentences or clauses.

Example: Mrs. Smith reviewed the essay carefully. **However**, she found no evidence of plagiarism.

F. Use commas to set off a contradictory phrase. A contradictory phrase uses a word such as *but*, *not*, or *unlike* to qualify what precedes it.

Example: Mary, **not Michael**, should have been awarded the academic scholarship.

G. Use commas to set off internal adverb clauses that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Example: Most people, **if they exercise too much**, will injure their joints and muscles.

In general, do not set off an adverb clause at the end of a sentence unless the clause is parenthetical or the sentence would be misread without the comma.

Example: Students should not attend the lecture **unless** they are really interested in the topic.

Rule 5– Other Uses for Commas

- A. Use commas to set off titles or degrees when they follow a person’s name.

Example: Mary Smith, Ph.D.

Tom Smith, M.D., will give the opening speech.

- B. Use a comma after each part of an address (except between the state and the zip code), a geographical name, or a date (except between the month and date).

Example: Mary’s new address is 123 Happy Street, Hammond, Louisiana 70401.

New Orleans, Louisiana is the location of the French Market.

On Thursday, May 24, 2006, she received notification about the scholarship.

- C. Use commas to set off words or names used in direct addresses.

Example: Bob, have you ever been to New York?

Yes, sir, I will deliver the shipment next Monday.

- D. Use commas to set off a tag question. A tag question (such as *Do you?* Or *Can I?*) emphasizes an implied answer to the statement preceding it.

Example: You do not like dogs, do you?

- E. Use a comma to set off quoted words from introductory words or other words in the sentence.

Example: Sarah said, “The library closes at 5:00 p.m. this Friday.”

“The library closes at 5:00 p.m. this Friday,” Sarah said.

“There was an accident,” Sarah shouted hysterically, “and Jane was taken to the hospital.”