

Correct Comma Use¹

Without commas, the parts of sentences can collide unexpectedly, creating confusion.

- *If you cook Elmer will do the dishes.*
- *While we were eating a rattlesnake approached our campsite.*

A comma added in the logical place (after *cook* and *eating*) prevents misreading that Elmer is being cooked, or that you were eating rattlesnake.

1. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining two independent clauses.

The coordinating conjunctions in English are: and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet. Independent clauses can stand as sentences by themselves.

- *Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.*

The problem is that coordinating conjunctions can be used to join two subjects with one verb or two verbs with one subject also, in which case you do not use a comma.

- *Cindy went to the store and bought milk.* (One subject *Cindy* both *went* and *bought*.)
- *Cindy and Jack went to a movie.* (Two subjects—*Cindy* and *Jack*—did one thing—*went to a movie*.)

The comma tells the reader that two sentences are being joined.

- *Cindy bought milk, and Jack went to a movie.* (Two subjects are doing two different things.)

2. Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase.

Typically, these word groups function as adverbs telling when, where, how, why, or under what conditions the main action of the sentence occurred.

- *When Irwin was ready to eat, his cat jumped onto the table.* (Without the comma, readers may have Irwin eating his cat. The comma signals that *his cat* is the subject of a new clause, not the object of the introductory prepositional phrase.)
- *A few weeks before, I met him in jail.* (Without the comma this becomes a sentence fragment which cannot stand on its own.)

3. Use a comma between all items in a series.

- *Bubbles of air, leaves, ferns, bits of wood, and insects are often found trapped in amber.*

Some writers omit the comma before the final item, but experts recommend using it to prevent ambiguity.

- *The activities include a search for lost treasure, dubious financial dealings, much discussion of ancient heresies and midnight revelries.* (Inserting a comma before *and* will make it clear that midnight revelries are a separate event rather than a second topic of debate.)

¹ This handout draws heavily from Hacker, Diana. *The Bedford Handbook*, 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 382-408.

4. Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not joined with *and*. Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives.

When two or more adjectives modify a noun separately they are coordinate and can be joined with *and*.

- *Roberto is a warm, gentle, affectionate father.*
- *Roberto is a warm and gentle and affectionate father.*

Adjectives that do not modify the noun separately are cumulative.

- *Three large gray shapes moved slowly toward us.*
- *Three and large and gray shapes moved slowly toward us. (And cannot be added between the adjectives. They are cumulative.)*

5. Use a comma to set off nonrestrictive element. Do not use a comma to set off restrictive elements.

Nonrestrictive elements add an additional thought and may be omitted without interfering with the meaning.

- *My grandfather, who celebrated his ninety-sixth birthday last week, misplaced his Datsun at the mall. (Information about Grampa's age can be omitted and the sentence will still make sense.)*

Restrictive elements are necessary for the sentence to make sense.

- *Students who study are usually more successful than students who party. (Information about students who study and party is necessary to the sense of the sentence.)*

6. Use commas to set off transitional and parenthetical expressions and expressions of contrast.

- *Natural foods are not always salt free; celery, for example, contains more sodium than imagined.*
- *The Epicurean philosophers sought mental, not bodily, pleasures.*
- *Unlike Robert, Celia loved dance contests.*

7. Use commas to set off nouns of direct address, the words *yes* and *no*, interrogative tags, and mild interjections.

- *Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.*
- *No, I didn't see him.*
- *He is real, isn't he?*
- *Well, we can believe it anyway.*

8. Use commas with expressions such as *he said* to set off direct quotations.

- *Jacques Lacan said, "Man's desire is the desire of the Other."*

9. Use commas with dates, addresses, titles, and numbers.

- *On July 14, 1789, the Bastille was reduced to rubble.*
- *You may contact me at 305 Bergamon St., Tourn, Montana, 59803.*
- *Mark Bellings, J.D., will speak at our public forum next week.*

In numbers more than four digits long, commas separate the digits into groups of three: 3,000 or 300,000 or 3,000,000.

10. Use a comma to prevent confusion.

- *Whenever you go, go quickly.*
- *Patients who can, walk up and down the halls several times a day.*