

Comma Rules

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence for clarity or pacing. Below are some of the most common situations in which commas are needed.

Between Three or More Items in a Series

Commas are used to separate words and phrases in a list.

EXAMPLES: Mr. Jenson wanted us to bring **apples, milk, and bread**. (words)
Rehearsals are held **before school, during lunch, and at night**. (phrases)

Between Independent Clauses Separated by a Conjunction

An independent clause is a group of words that can form a complete sentence on its own (See Basic Punctuation handout). If two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*), the conjunction must have a comma before it. A comma is also necessary when two independent clauses are joined by a pair of correlating conjunctions such as *either/or, neither/nor, and not only/but also*.

EXAMPLES: The new cars arrived yesterday, **so** ours will be delivered soon. (coordinating)
Not only did I go to Mexico, **but I also** went to Honduras and Belize. (correlating)

After Introductory Adverbs and Phrases

Commas are used after the following types of introductory elements:

- Introductory adverbs (often words that end in *-ly*)
- Participial phrases (phrases that begin with the *-ing* or *-ed* form of a verb)
- Infinitive phrases (phrases in which the verb is preceded by the word *to*)
- Prepositional phrases (phrases that begin with a preposition and end with a noun)

EXAMPLES: **Incidentally**, I was not late this morning. (adverb)
Hoping for the best, she approached her mother. (participial phrase)
To arrive on time, we must leave here by six. (infinitive phrase)
In the dark, you looked like a thief. (prepositional phrase)

After an Introductory Dependent Clause

A dependent clause is a group of words that depends on an independent clause to form a complete sentence. They often begin with a subordinating conjunction (*although, after, because, if, since, until, when, as, while, etc.*).

EXAMPLES: **Although blue is her favorite color**, she is wearing red today.
When Dad gets home from work, we will eat dinner.

Between Coordinating Adjectives

Commas separate coordinating adjectives (words that modify the same noun and could be written in the opposite order in the sentence). These adjectives could be separated by the word *and* instead of a comma.

EXAMPLES: His **arrogant, condescending** manner annoyed us. (The order of the words *arrogant* and *condescending* can be reversed, so a comma is needed.)
Everyone loved our **former math** teacher. (The sentence would not make sense if the words were reversed: *math former teacher*. Therefore, do not use a comma.)

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Around Nonessential Words

Commas are used to set off nonessential words and phrases (words that appear after a noun and can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning).

EXAMPLES: The quality of the material, **however**, was beyond question. (word)
 Mr. Green is, **in my opinion**, a very successful salesman. (phrase)

In contrast, commas do not set off essential phrases that give the sentence its complete meaning.

EXAMPLES: I have two sisters. The sister **who lives in Japan** is coming to visit. (Because I have two sisters, the phrase *who lives in Japan* is necessary for clarity.)

 The committee reached a decision **that was not popular**. (The adjective clause *that was not popular* is necessary to know which decision was reached.)

Note: Clauses beginning with *which* are always preceded by a comma.

Around Appositives

Commas are used to set off appositives (words or phrases that rename a noun).

EXAMPLES: Lacrosse, **a sport played hundreds of years ago**, is still popular.
 The award was given to Jan, **Carol's daughter**.

Before and After Quotations

Commas are used to separate quotations from the sentences in which they are found.

EXAMPLE: "Research," she said, "has found that an unhealthy diet increases the risk of cancer."

With Place Names and Dates

A comma should separate the name of a city from its state, and if a city is listed with its state or country, a comma is also needed after the name of the state or country. When dates are written, a comma is needed between the date and year and between the name of a day and its date. If a date, month, and year are listed together, a comma is needed after the year as well.

EXAMPLES: We moved here from **Salt Lake City, Utah**, three months ago. (Use a comma after the city and after the state.)
 On **Tuesday, August 13, 1998**, I moved to Texas. (Use a comma after the day, the date, and the year.)
 We moved here from **San Francisco** three months ago. (No comma is necessary if you have only one element of a date or place name.)

Around Nouns of Direct Address

Commas set off the names of individuals being spoken to.

EXAMPLES: **Jamie**, please clean your room.
 Please tell us, **Mr. Thomas**, how you came up with this marvelous machine.