

COMMAS (MANDATORY USES)

Here are some of the more frequent, mandatory uses of commas:

TWO COMPLETE SENTENCES + COORDINATING CONJUNCTION RULE

When you connect two sentences (or two main clauses) with a conjunction (e.g. and, or, but, etc), you must have a comma.

EX:

Here are two main (or independent) clauses (or two complete sentences):

Jane is going to the party.

+

I am not.

CONNECTED:

Jane is going to the party, but I am not.

If we have two complete sentences (or two main clauses) and a coordinating conjunction, then we must have a comma before the conjunction.

BUT is our coordinating conjunction which is attempting to link the two main (or independent) clauses (or two complete sentences) together.

ITEMS-IN-A-SERIES RULE

Whenever you have three or more items listed, you must use a comma and a coordinating conjunction in order to list them correctly.

EX:

I bought apples, pears, and bananas at the store.

Note: There is an old trend among English teachers to tell students not to use the final commas, thus "apples, pears and bananas." However, nothing can be more fallacious. The reason being: Let's say you're having a party where you are discussing the idea of inviting couples and singles. Since the natural tendency is to pair couples together away from singles, then you might have a sentence like this one->

EX:

Dick and Jane, Tom and Ellen, Clifton and Rita, Jack, Lisa, Michael, and Todd and Jessica are coming to the party.

Notice how the comma and the AND help to indicate the last item.

NON-ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS RULE

Sometimes, in sentences, we like to include information that is not necessary to the main message.

EX:

George Washington, who chopped down a cherry tree, was the first president of the United States.

EX:

Even though he worked on the atomic bomb, Einstein advocated non-violence and vegetarianism.

EX:

Many vitamins and minerals are present in milk, an often overlooked source of great nutrition.

Notice how commas are used to separate the important information from the not-so-important information. Since the information is not-so-essential or NON-ESSENTIAL, we use commas to separate it from the useful information.

NOTE: When non-essential elements appear at the beginning of the sentence, we treat this element as an INTRODUCTORY ELEMENT. For stylistic purposes, you may use or not use the comma here; however, it is preferred.

SEPARATING COORDINATING ADJECTIVES

Most of us are aware that we can stack adjectives to make our descriptions much more vivid. However, in order to stack adjectives, we must be aware of commas in this situation.

EX:

The silly, dilapidated building is being destroyed.

Notice how the words silly and dilapidated work separately to modify the word building. Because they work separately, we use a comma to set them apart.

EX:

The dark blonde woman went to the salon. = Means a woman with dark blonde hair.

The dark, blonde woman went to the salon. = Means a dark woman with blonde hair.

The deep blue lake. = a lake with a significant shade of blue

The deep, blue lake = a blue lake with a significant depth

BEFORE AND AFTER QUOTATIONS

Using a comma before the approach of a direct quote is preferred.

EX:

The philosopher noted, "Balance is a consequence of good and bad interpretation."

Moreover, using a comma after a direct quote is also preferred.

EX:

"Death carries a dignity its own," said the commander.

SURROUNDING NOUNS OF DIRECT ADDRESS

Whenever you use the proper name of a person (to address them), you typically include commas surrounding the name.

EX:

Thomas, where did you place your pants?

Okay, Hilary, I understand the problem.

Joseph, I hope you enjoy the film.