

Usage Comma Rules

Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence. They often tell readers to pause between words, and they help clarify the meaning of sentences. Below are some of the most common situations in which commas are needed.

BETWEEN ITEMS IN A SERIES

Commas are used to separate words, phrases, or clauses 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)

The supervisor wanted to know **who had broken into the store, why they had done so, and what had been taken**. (clauses)

BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES SEPARATED BY A CONJUNCTION

An independent clause is a group of words that can form a complete sentence without depending on another clause to be complete. 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, **and** ours will be delivered tomorrow. (coordinating)

Most of the lecture was interesting, **but** some students were bored. (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 introductory adverbs, as well as after introductory participial, infinitive, and prepositional phrases. (A participial phrase acts as an adjective or adverb and begins with the *-ing* or *-ed* form of a verb. An infinitive verb phrase is a verb preceded by the word *to*. A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition and ends with a noun [the object of the preposition].)

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 cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. An introductory dependent clause often begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *although, after, because, if, since, until, when, as, while*, etc. that makes it dependent on a second clause.

EXAMPLES: **Although she is wearing red**, blue is her favorite color.

When Dad gets home from work, we will eat dinner.

BETWEEN COORDINATING ADJECTIVES

A comma is used to separate coordinating adjectives, which are descriptive words that modify the same noun and could be written in the opposite order in the sentence. These adjectives can also be separated by the word *and* instead of a comma.

EXAMPLES: His **arrogant, condescending** manner annoyed us.

(His manner is arrogant and condescending.)

Everyone loved our **former math** teacher.

(There is no comma between *former* and *math* because the sentence would not make sense if the words were reversed: *math former teacher*.)

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AROUND NONESSENTIAL WORDS

Commas are used to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses. These 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)

My father, **who was born in southern Utah**, is 83 years old. (clause)

(The clause, *who was born in southern Utah*, is not necessary to identify my father because I only have one father.)

In contrast, commas are not used to set off essential phrases or clauses, which are needed to 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 to identify which sister I'm referring to. Commas should not be used.)

The committee reached a decision **that was not popular**.

(The adjective clause, *that was not popular*, is necessary to know which decision was reached. Commas should not be used.)

The car **with the flat tire and broken windshield** was in the shop.

(The phrase, *with the flat tire and broken windshield*, is necessary to show which car was in the shop. Commas should not be used.)

NOTE: Clauses beginning with *which* are always preceded by a comma whereas clauses beginning with *that* are never preceded by a comma.

AROUND APPOSITIVES

Commas are used to set off appositives, which are 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. Closing commas and periods almost always go inside the quotation marks.

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 nouns of direct address, which are 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.