

## Comma Usage

A comma is a punctuation mark that is used to help readers. Without its use, sentences can be misread, misunderstood, and/or have an unclear meaning to your readers. When you are reading, a comma indicates a pause. However, just because you may have paused in your writing for some reason, whether it is because you have stopped to think or because of another type of interruption, do not automatically put in a comma at that point. Commas are used according to rules; knowing and understanding these rules will not only help your writing be better but will help your readers recognize what you are trying to say. The main two purposes of commas are to separate and set off elements of a sentence. Following are the most common usage of commas seen in college writing today.

### 1. Use commas with items in a series.

A comma is used to separate three or more items in a series (listing) of words, phrases, or clauses.

Examples:

- One of my favorite meals includes fried chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, **and** gravy.
- Books, pens, **and** papers must be brought to class every day.
- People brought aid to the elderly, the homeless, **and** the sick after the disaster.
- He ran down the street, across the park, **and** into the arms of his grandmother.
- Reading popular novels, eating Italian food, **and** taking naps are activities that Ramon enjoys most.
- Because the weather turned bad, the park became crowded, **and** we had no more money, we left the amusement park early.
- When the baby is napping, Mary is at kindergarten, **and** Dad is at work, Mother has time for herself.

**Note:** Some texts suggest that in formal writing, the final comma used before the connecting word (usually the words *and* and/or *or*) in a series is optional. In magazines and newspapers as well as in some business writing, the comma before the final item is sometimes left out. **Suggestion:** When writing essays, papers, etc. for college, always use that final comma; you'll never be wrong, and your meaning will be clearly understood.

A comma **is not** used between two words, two phrases, or two dependent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*). **Neither** is one used to separate two verbs that belong to one subject.

Examples:

- Randy received a raise in pay **and** got better working hours.
- Please turn on the air conditioner **or** open all the windows so that the house will be more comfortable.
- A good money manager controls expenses **and** invests money for the future.
- My father was born in December 1919 **and** died in June 2003.

**Do not** use a comma when coordinating conjunctions connect all the elements in a series.

Examples: My date told me he did not like my hairstyle **or** my makeup **or** my dress.  
 The storm caused damage to the roof of our house **and** tore siding off the garage **and** blew down all the trees in the front yard.  
 Samuel bought raspberries **and** oranges **and** grapes at the fruit market.

A comma is used to separate descriptive words (adjectives) that modify the same noun **only** if the word *and* inserted between the words sounds natural.

Examples: Joe peered into the hot, still smoking car engine.  
 Tony wore a pale green tuxedo to the formal dance.  
 I need a sturdy, reliable truck for driving to work.  
 Cody built a red brick fountain in his mother's garden.

## 2. Use a comma with introductory material (expressions).

Use a comma following an introductory word, introductory dependent clauses, and/or long introductory phrases.

Many introductory word groups tell the reader when, where, how, why, or under what condition the main action of the sentence occurred. The comma lets your reader know that the introduction of the sentence has come to an end, and the main part of the sentence is about to begin.

Examples: **By four in the afternoon**, it had started to storm.  
**After the game was over**, we all went swimming.  
**By the way**, could you tell me the way to St. Louis?  
**Before the arrival of the musicians**, the crowd was getting restless.  
**If you don't hear from me**, assume that I am not going shopping with you.

**Note:** If the expression is placed somewhere else in the sentence, it is not set off by a comma. A dependent clause at the end of the sentence is usually not set off with a comma. If the intro material is brief, the comma is optional or sometimes omitted entirely. **Suggestion:** If the comma is optional, and you put it in, you'll never be wrong.

Examples: I will not stop searching **until I find my diamond ring**.  
 We all went swimming **after the game was over**.  
 We skate on our neighbor's pond **in the winter**.

## 3. Use a comma to separate two complete thoughts (independent clauses) connected by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*).

These two clauses must be of equal value (parallel). Remember to place the comma **before** the coordinating conjunction **not** after it.

- Examples:
- Mike enjoys his job, **for** it offers a challenge to him.
  - Mike enjoys his job, **and** he performs it well.
  - Mike does not enjoy his job, **nor** does he perform it well.
  - Mike enjoys his job, **but** he has a long drive to work each day.
  - Mike can choose to work four ten-hour days, **or** he can work five eight-hour days.
  - Mike works hard, **yet** he also makes time for relaxation.
  - Mike enjoys his job, **so** he works hard.

The comma may be omitted if the two complete thoughts are short, and there is no danger of misunderstanding the sentence.

Example:           The plane took off **and** we were on our way.

#### 4. Use commas for clarity in your writing.

- A. Use commas to set off nonessential/not needed/nonrestrictive material/nonidentifying expressions from the rest of the sentence. Do not use commas with essential/needed/restrictive material/identifying expressions.**

If written information (material) is needed to identify the noun that comes before it, it is said to be essential, needed, or restrictive information. (These three terms all mean the same thing.) In other words, it is some type of identifying expression or terminology, and no commas are used to set it off. These words cannot be left out without creating confusion or changing the meaning of the sentence.

- B. Use commas to set off interrupters and appositives from the rest of the sentence.**

If the noun is already specifically identified, the expression that comes after it is nonessential/nonidentifying/not needed/nonrestrictive, and commas are used to set it off. This type of information adds more information to the sentence; it interrupts the flow of thoughts and does not change the basic meaning of the sentence. It can be left out of the sentence without causing confusion.

An interrupter is an aside or transition that interrupts the flow of a sentence and does not affect its meaning.

Appositives rename or describe nouns and pronouns. However, they often serve as transitions and can be necessary for clarity and a smooth flow of ideas. An appositive comes directly before or after a noun or pronoun and renames it.

Putting commas around appositives and interrupters tells readers that these elements add extra information to the sentence, but they are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. If an appositive or interrupter is in the middle of a sentence, set it off with two commas – one before and one after the nonessential words. If an appositive or

interrupter comes at the beginning or end of a sentence, separate it from the rest of the sentence using only one comma.

### Words or Phrases Often Used as Interrupters:

as a matter	for example	to tell the truth
of fact	for instance	it seems
after all	however	
actually	nevertheless	

Examples: My cousin LeRoy will be in town tomorrow.  
 LeRoy, **my cousin**, will be in town tomorrow.  
 Lily, **a senior**, will take her nursing exam this summer.  
 The prices are outrageous at Chapters, **the campus bookstore**.  
 My brother, **a student at Ohio University**, is visiting me for the summer.  
 Many people, **it seems**, prefer to live where there is a definite change of the seasons.  
 Alaska, **as a matter of fact**, does have a summer season.  
 Phoenix, **however**, is known for its summer-like hot dry weather all year long.

### C. Commas may or may not be used to set off adjectives clauses.

An adjective clause is a group of words that begins with *who*, *which*, or *that*, has a subject and a verb, and describes a noun that appears right before the clause in the sentence. Whether or not an adjective clause should be set off from the rest of the sentence by commas depends on its meaning in the sentence. This type of clause might be an interrupter and not be needed to the meaning of the sentence; on the other hand, it could be very necessary. If an adjective clause can be taken out of a sentence without completely changing the meaning of the sentence, put commas around the clause.

Examples: A Dollar Saved, **which is my local grocery store**, charges awfully high prices.  
 Marla, **who studied hard all semester**, will pass the course.

If an adjective clause is essential to the meaning of a sentence, do not put commas around it. You can tell whether a clause is needed by taking it out of the sentence and seeing if the meaning of the sentence changes much.

Examples: The only grocery store **that sold homemade bread** went out of business  
 All students **who study hard** will pass the test.  
 Dogs **that have had their shots** will be allowed to participate in the dog show.

### D. Use commas to avoid misunderstandings.

In some sentences, commas are needed to prevent confusion and misunderstanding. Use a comma to separate elements that might be misread. Without a comma, the exact meaning of the following sentences is not clear.

Examples: **Besides Mary Lou Anne** is the only experienced driver.  
**Besides,** Mary Lou Anne is the only experienced driver.  
**Besides Mary,** Lou Anne is the only experienced driver.  
**Besides Mary Lou,** Anne is the only experienced driver.

(Notice how the comma causes the reader to pause and makes the meaning clear right away. The meaning of each sentence changes as well. Without the benefit of the comma, the reader might misunderstand the relationship among the first four words.)

5. **Use commas to separate the parts of an address (city, county, state, or zip code) when written in a sentence.** However, do not use a comma between the state and ZIP code. If the sentence continues on after the address ends, put a comma after the completed address.

Examples: I ordered the gift from The Baby Wear Company, P.O. Box 100, 3509 North River Street, Chicago, Illinois 60614.  
 My friend now lives at 714 West Main Street, Williamsville, Illinois 62693, instead of 417 West Main Street.  
 George works in Jacksonville, Florida, but lives in a small town twenty miles away.

6. **Use commas to separate the day from the month and the year when writing dates in a sentence.** If only the month and year are given, a comma is not used. If a sentence continues on after the date, put a comma following the date.

Examples: On Friday, June 30, 2006, my next-door neighbor will be one hundred years old.  
 Joe's birthday is on June 30, 2006.  
 That company opened for business in November 1993.  
 I went to France in October of 2005.  
 April is my favorite month of the year.

**Exception:** Commas are not needed if the date is reversed.

Example: One day I will never forget is 12 December 1964.

7. **Use commas in a direct address when you use a name in speaking directly to someone.**

When addressing someone by name, (speaking directly to someone) set that person's name off from the rest of the sentence by using commas.

**Do not** use commas when you are speaking **about** someone or merely using someone's name in a sentence.

Examples: **Joe**, please get a gallon of milk when you go to the grocery store for me.  
 Please get a gallon of milk when you go to the grocery store for me, **Joe**.  
 Please get a gallon of milk, **Joe**, when you go to the grocery store for me.  
 I asked **Joe** to get me a gallon of milk when he went to the grocery store for me.

**8. A comma is used to set off a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.**

A direct quotation is the exact words of a speaker and quotation marks are used to enclose these words. Notice the placement of the comma when used with the quotation marks.

Examples: Tom said, "The house that I like is for sale."  
 "The house that I like is for sale," said Tom.  
 "The house that I like," said Tom, "is for sale."

**Note:** Do not use a comma with an indirect quotation or summarization of someone's words. An indirect quotation is usually recognized by the use of the word *that*.

Examples: Tom said **that** the house he likes is for sale.  
 Brandy said **that** we would go to the restaurant next week.  
 I was told **that** my car needed to have four new tires.

**9. A comma is used following the opening (salutation) of a personal letter and the complimentary closing of any letter.**

Examples: Dear Charlie,  
 Sincerely yours,  
 Yours truly,

**Note:** In formal letters a colon (:) is used instead of the comma after the opening.

Examples: Dear Sir or Madam:  
 Dear Mayor Barnes:

**10. A comma is used with certain numbers.**

Commas are usually placed between the third and fourth digits from the right, the sixth and seventh, and so on (separate them into groups of three).

Examples: 1,000 20,000 \$7,654,321

However, **do not** use commas in serial numbers, with page and line numbers, telephone numbers, addresses, and four-digit years, but commas are added in years of five or more figures.

Examples: The engines serial number was AB 6790235.  
 See page 1014 in the reference manual.  
 Call the school at 1-800-727-4161.  
 Alana lives at 3597 Wayland Drive.  
 Jules graduated from high school in 2005.  
 That fossil was from 20,000 BC.

**11. Use commas to set off adjectives in pairs that follow a noun.**

Example:           The soldiers, **tired and hungry**, marched back to camp.  
                      The lions, **strong and lean**, prowled the grasslands looking for prey.

**12. Use commas to set off parenthetical elements such as mild interjections and short answers to questions (*oh, well, yes, no, of course, and others*) and special abbreviations (*etc., i.e., e.g., and others*).**

Examples:       **Oh**, what a silly question!  
                      **Yes**, I have seen that movie.  
                      **Of course**, it is necessary to evacuate the building during a fire drill.  
                      Backpacks, books, paper, pens, **etc.**, were scattered across the floor.  
                      The early critical comments, **i.e.**, a scornful review in the *Times*, influenced many people.

The information for this comma handout was adapted from the following COM 098/099 textbooks:

Anker, Susan. *Real Writing with Readings*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004.

Brandon, Lee. *At a Glance Sentences*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006.

Langan, John. *College Writing Skills with Readings*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005.

Wingersky, Joy, Jan Boerner, and Diana Holguin-Balogh. *Writing Paragraphs and Essays*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006.