

Comma Usage

A Quick Guide



The comma is one of the more hated punctuation marks, perhaps only less hated than the semicolon; however, using commas doesn't have to be complicated. Here are a few general comma tips to help with any academic writing situation.

When to Use Commas

Commas are appropriate to use for a variety of reasons.

- Use commas **between items in a series** (a list of 3 or more items)
 - Sometimes the comma is left out before the "and" before the last item on a list. Unless you know that your instructor will accept this, it is better to err on the side of caution and include the comma.
- Use a comma **between independent clauses** (complete sentences) **joined by a coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so)
 - This prevents the sentence from being a run-on and creates a compound sentence. Note: the comma always goes before the conjunction, not after it.
- Use a comma **after a subordinate (dependent) clause at the beginning of a sentence**, and use commas **around a subordinate clause in the middle of a sentence** ("Because it was raining, I decided to stay home." "Since it was dark, I turned on the light in the living room." "The car ride, because it was so long, quickly became boring.")
 - A subordinate clause in the middle of a sentence functions to break up the flow of the sentence, which is why the commas are added.
- Use a comma **after an introductory element** to a sentence (phrases, such as "In the beginning," "At the time," "On that day," "After coming home," "When it rains," "Beginning today," and other such phrases and words, such as "First," "Finally," "Next," "Then," etc.)
 - Any time a sentence starts with some type of phrase, it is likely to need a comma after that phrase. Prepositional phrases are probably the most common type of introductory phrases you will encounter, and a comprehensive list of them might be included in an English textbook but can be found online at <http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/preposition.htm>. Words like "first, finally," and "next" are called enumerators and are used to indicate moving from one step to the next, from one point to another, or between events and locations in a story or description.
- Use commas **between multiple adjectives** (words that provide more detail and description for nouns – persons, places, things, and ideas), which are side by side (ex: large, brown, fluffy dog)

- The easiest way to test if words like adjectives need commas between them is to read the sentence to yourself and add the word “and” between the adjectives. If “and” sounds correct, then you likely need to add a comma.
- Use commas **to set off phrases that interrupt or are nonessential** to the flow of a sentence (ex: “The dog, which lived in the couple’s backyard, barked loudly at anyone who walked by the house.” “My father, on the other hand, does not like bacon.”)
 - By enclosing such interrupting phrases in commas, you indicate that the phrase, while it might be interesting (← see what I did there?), is not needed to understand the meaning of the sentence.
- Use commas **to indicate when someone or something is being addressed directly** (ex: “Mom, I don’t want to go to school today!” “Spot, play fetch!”)
 - These will only show up in quoted material, such as dialogue.
- Use commas **to set off a direct quote** if the sentence does not flow naturally into the quoted material (ex: Marie says, “I love this show!” versus Marie has always told me that she “loves this show.”)
 - A quote that needs to be set off by a comma will usually be prefaced with a word like “said” or “stated” while one that doesn’t need a comma will generally sound like a natural part of the sentence.
- Use commas **to separate parts of dates, addresses, and places** (May 5, 2015; 1284 Green Street, Bassett, VA 24055; Chicago, Illinois).
 - These commas are used to make items like addresses and dates easier to read.

When Not to Use Commas

While there are many situation where commas should be added, there are several situations where a comma may seem necessary but does not actually belong.

- Do **not** use commas **before every instance of a coordinating conjunction**.
 - While there are many instances where commas are appropriate with coordinating conjunctions, unless the conjunction is before the final item in a list or is being used to combine two independent clauses, there is generally no need to add a comma before it.
- Do **not** use commas **around essential sentence elements** (“Anyone who needs to find a ride home can meet me at the bus stop.”)
 - In the example, the phrase “who needs to find a ride home” is important to understand the meaning of the sentence so does not need to be set off by commas.

Other Writing Center Resources

- Prepositions
- Fragments and Run-Ons

Further Reading

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/1/>