

Commas

LEARN NINE WAYS TO USE COMMAS

USE A COMMA IN A COMPOUND SENTENCE

A sentence contains two (main) clauses joined by a comma and one of the conjunctions: *and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*. An independent clause contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete idea. An independent clause is the heart of any sentence.

In a compound sentence, the comma comes before the coordinating conjunction.

| subject | verb | cc | subject | verb |
|----------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|------------------------|
| Andi | has | so | she | knows some Portuguese. |
| | been | | | |
| | to | | | |
| | Brazil | | | |
| | , | | | |

| subject | verb | cc | subject | verb |
|----------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|--------------|
| Jerry | can | yet | she | rarely does. |
| | speak | | | |
| | ancient | | | |
| | Greek | | | |
| | , | | | |

Punctuating Long Compound Sentences

Some compound sentences begin or end with phrases. Other begins with dependent clauses. Such phrases and clauses can also take commas.

| | subject | verb | subject | verb |
|---------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| When | he | listened | he | began |
| my | | to | | |
| father | | opera | | |
| was | | , | | |
| young | | and | | |
| , | | | | |
| to | | | | |
| learn | | | | |
| Italian | | | | |
| , | | | | |
| at | | | | |
| least | | | | |
| the | | | | |
| kind | | | | |
| used | | | | |

on
stage.

USE A COMMA AFTER AN INTRODUCTORY ELEMENT

Introductory elements are words, , or clauses that come at the beginning of a sentence.

Subordinate

(dependent) clause: *As I walked through the crowd, someone picked my pocket.*

Phrase: *In fact, all of my money was stolen.*

Word: *Fortunately, I was carrying only two dollars at the time.*

NOTE: Remember that introductory elements

1. Begin .
2. Introduce clauses.

REVIEW THESE IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

Phrase: *Groups of words without a subject or predicate (verb).*

Subordinate

clause: *Group of words with a subject and predicate (verb) that does not express a complete idea.*

Mainclause: *Group of words with a subject and predicate (verb) that expresses a complete idea. The main clause is the heart of a sentence.*

USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE ITEMS IN A SERIES

To keep the meaning of your sentences clear, use commas to separate , , , , , and that come one after another in a series.

NOTE: In general, do not set off pairs of words, phrases, or clauses with commas.

Not: *Children feared the man who wore the red hat, and the funny suit.*

But: *Children feared the man who wore the red hat and the funny suit.*

- **Commas Separating Words in a Series**

Nouns: *Tibet, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are countries in Asia.*

Adjectives: *A cold, rainy, windy day is no time to go camping in the Andres Mountains.*

Adverbs: *The pilgrims moved toward Mecca slowly, carefully, and devoutly.*

- **Commas Separating Phrases in a Series**

- : *Lincoln wrote that “the government of the people, by the*
- people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”*
- : *To be free, to care for children, and to worship God*
- are my*
- mother’s priorities.*
- : *Running barefoot over rocks, climbing over barbed*
- wire,*
- and forging a stream, the young slave finally escaped.*

- **Commas Separating Clauses in a Series**

- clauses: *For the most part, Mexicans speak Spanish, Brazilians speak Portuguese, and Haitians speak French.*
- clauses: *Many problems remained between North and South*
- after the last shot of the Civil War was fired, after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, and after Lincoln was assassinated.*

NOTE: You may omit the comma before the last item if you are sure its absence won't confuse readers. Whichever method you use, be consistent.

USE A COMMA AROUND A NONRESTRICTIVE MODIFIER AND A SENTENCE INTERRUPTER

A **nonrestrictive modifier** (adjective) helps describe a noun but does not define it and is not essential to its meaning. If you left that modifier out of the sentence, the sentence's meaning would not change.

A **restrictive modifier** identifies a noun or distinguishes it from all other such nouns. This type of modifier limits the noun meaning of one particular person, place or thing.

- Nonrestrictive:** *Sally Franks, who learned to drive at age 13, works as an mechanic at Ted’s Garage.*
- Restrictive:** *The woman who works as a mechanic at Ted’s Garage learned to drive at age 13.*

An Easy Way to Distinguish Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Modifiers

A modifier that can be removed without affecting the meaning of the sentence is nonrestrictive and needs commas.

*Students, **who can use campus services free of charge**, must show their IDs before entering the library.*

If you removed the modifier, the sentence would read

Students must show their IDs before entering the library.

The clause *who can use campus services free of charge* doesn't restrict the meaning of *students* to a specific group of students. The clause refers to all students.

A **sentence interrupter** is a word or phrase that appears in the middle of a sentence and forces the reader to pause. Most interrupters introduce another thought that is not as important as the interrupted thought. In other words, sentence interrupters are nonrestrictive. Always place commas around sentence interrupters.

*He was given all that money, we think, by his aunt.
The basement door, claims my father, was forced open.*

USE A COMMA TO SEPARATE COORDINATE ADJECTIVES

Coordinate adjectives are two or more describers that follow one another and describe the same noun.

An old, red barn sat on the hill.

Sometimes, adjectives you think describe the same noun really describe a larger term, which contains an adjective and a noun.

The old high school was torn down.

High describes *school*, but *old* does not. *Old* describes the larger term *highschool*.

An Easy Way to Tell Whether Adjectives Are Coordinate

If placing the word *and* between the adjectives makes sense, they are coordinate and can be separated by a *comma*.

Coordinate: *The barn, which was old and red, sat on a hill.*

Not Coordinate: *The school, which was old and (?)high, was torn down.*

CAUTION: Don't separate two coordinate adjectives with both a comma and *and*.

Not: *The old, and red barn sat on a hill.*

But: *The old, red barn sat on a hill.*

USE COMMAS IN DATES, ADDRESSES, NUMBERS, AND TITLES

- **Place commas in dates between the day, date, and year.**

July 4, 1776

Thursday, March 31, 1939

CAUTION: Don't use a comma if you are mentioning the month and year only.

Not: *July, 1776*

But: *July 1776*

- **Place commas in addresses**

In a sentence, use a comma to separate the street address from the city. However, when addressing an envelope, place the street address on one line and the city on the next. In this case, **do not** follow the street address with a comma.

Bertrand Bong lives at 10 Willow Drive, Eugene, Idaho.

BUT

Bertrand Bong
10 Willow Drive
Eugene, Idaho 00000

Always place a comma between city and state or city and country. When writing a sentence, use a comma to separate the state or country and any information that follows.

They have lived in Mexico City, Mexico, since 1997; before that they lived in Seattle, Washington, and several other large American cities.

- **Place Commas in Numbers**

Use commas in units of more than three digits, setting off every third digit as you count from the right.

*They paid \$95,000 for their house.
Her wedding dress cost \$1,000.*

- **Use Commas with Titles and Degrees**

Titles: *Laura Legal, Esq.*

Degrees: *Philosophie, Ph.D.*

NOTE: If you place a comma before a title or a degree, you should place one after the title or degree unless the title or degree ends the sentence.

Steve Smith, M.D., graduated from Duke University.

USE A COMMA TO SET OFF A DIRECTION QUOTATION

A [quotation](#) uses another writer's exact words within quotation marks. Use direct quotations to include dialogue or to support your own ideas with opinions of others.

According to Shakespeare, "Crabbed age and youth cannot live together."

"Praise be to Allah, the lord of creation," said Muhammad.

CAUTION: Don't use a comma if the quotation ends in a question mark or exclamation point.

*"Who was president of the Confederacy?" Jo asked.
"Don't trust him!" she screamed. "He's not one of us."*

USE COMMAS TO TAKE THE PLACE OF WORDS

Frequently, you can replace the conjunction *and* with a comma.

*The
dog
was
frightened*

,
tired

,
*And
hungry.*

OR

*The
dog
was
frightened*

,
tired

,
Hungry.

You can even use a comma to replace several words, thereby streamlining your writing and giving it variety and emphasis. This practice is especially useful in sentences that express a contrast.

He was hardworking, not brilliant.

USE COMMAS TO MAKE SENTENCES CLEAR

You can sometimes make sentences clearer by placing commas between words that, when set side by side, might be misleading, confusing, or unintentionally humorous.

Not: *Whenever he cooked the cat climbed onto the counter.*
But: *Whenever he cooked, the cat climbed onto the counter.*

LEARN WHEN NOT TO USE A COMMA

1. To separate a subject and verb even if the subject is followed by several adjectives:

Not: *A bird with large, red wings and a bright yellow tail, perched on my window.*
But: *A bird with large, red wings and a bright yellow tail perched on my window.*

2. To separate a verb and its object:

| | | |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| | verb | direct object |
| Not: | <i>dearly love,</i> | <i>artichoke hearts.</i> |
| | verb | direct object |
| But: | <i>dearly love</i> | <i>artichoke hearts.</i> |

3. To separate a verb and its complement:

Complements are adjectives that come after the verb and describe the subject.

Not: *The weather has been, cold and rainy.*
But: *The weather has been cold and rainy.*

4. To separate an adjective and the word it describes:

Not: *The prisoner climbed a 10 – foot, wall.*
But: *The prisoner climbed a 10 – foot wall.*

5. To separate paired words and phrases:

Not: *Professor Mendez teaches both French, and Spanish.*
But: *Professor Mendez teaches both French and Spanish.*

6. To set off subordinate elements at the end of a sentence:

Not: *The Romans built roads across their empire, because their armies needed to move quickly from one province to another.*
But: *The Romans built roads across their empire because their armies needed to move quickly from one province to another.*

NOTE: For easier reading, you may put a comma before a participial phrase that ends a sentence:

People lost in the cave screamed, hoping rescuers outside world hear them.

Sample Quiz questions:

1. Choose the item that uses a comma or commas correctly.
 - a. I try my best, but I still cannot understand the metric system.
 - b. I try my best but, I still cannot understand the metric system.
 - c. I try my best, but, I still cannot understand the metric system.

Answer: a. I try my best, but I still cannot understand the metric system.

2. Choose the item that uses a comma or commas correctly.
 - a. Originating in ninth – century China the story of Cinderella has many forms.
 - b. Originating in ninth – century China, the story of Cinderella has many forms.
 - c. Originating in ninth – century, China the story of Cinderella has many forms.

Answer: b. Originating in ninth – century China, the story of Cinderella has many forms.