



Commas

Commas can be tricky little fellows. Often teachers will tell you to put them where you pause when you read a sentence—that doesn't always work! It's best to simply know where and where not to place them, which can get confusing. Here are some guidelines for how to use commas:

A Short Refresher on Phrases and Clauses

Learning where to place commas largely depends on your ability to identify phrases and clauses (we have separate handouts on both of these that you may want to consult).

Phrase

A phrase is a group of words that does not contain both a subject and a predicate. It contains **either** a subject **or** a predicate, so a phrase does not function as an independent unit.

Clause

A clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a predicate. A clause can be independent (a complete sentence) or dependent (an incomplete sentence) that must depend on an independent sentence to be complete. Clauses can also be restrictive (necessary to the meaning of the sentence) or non-restrictive (extra information in the sentence).

General rules for comma with phrases and clauses

- When joining two independent clauses (complete sentences) with a conjunction, always use a comma.
- If a sentence begins with a dependent clause (as this one does), separate the dependent clause from the independent clause with a comma.
- If the dependent clause is non-restrictive, it should be separated with a comma (or commas if in the middle of the sentence).
- When joining an introductory phrase (described below under Introductory Phrases) to a sentence, use a comma after it to set it off.
- When using a phrase or clause as an appositive, set it off with commas.

Okay, now that we have a few general rules, here are some more specific instructions.

Compound Sentences

Anytime you are joining two COMPLETE sentences (independent clauses) together with a conjunction, you need a comma before the conjunction. You may have heard the acronym FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). It will help you remember the conjunctions that signal you to put a comma in. However, it can get tricky because you can use these same conjunctions to join elements in a short, two-item list or compound elements in a sentence. In these cases, you will NOT use a comma. Confused? Here are a couple of examples to help:

Compound Sentence:

Mark and Josh like to write, and they also like to read.

Independent clause, conjunction, and independent clause.

(Note that there are subjects and verbs on BOTH sides of the conjunction.)

Short List:

Mark and Josh like to write and also like to read.

Lists

When you create a list that has more than two elements, you need to separate the items in the list with commas.*

When you go to the store, buy broccoli, ham, mustard, and green beans.

People often leave out the comma before "and," but it is sometimes useful because some elements in your list may have conjunctions within them, making the last comma a signal that the list is ending and that the last two elements are separate.

When you go to the store, buy jam, potatoes, macaroni, and cheese.

The comma before the "and" shows that "macaroni" and "cheese" are two separate items, not one.

* If one or more of the elements in your list has a comma within it, you can separate the elements with semicolons. See our Semicolons handout.

Joining a Dependent and an Independent Clause

When you join a dependent clause to an independent clause (see our handout on clauses), you should use a comma. Adverb and adjective clauses are common types of dependent clauses. (Adjective clauses will be discussed later under Appositives.)

Adverb Clauses

An adverb clause answers "How?" "Why?" "When?" "Under what circumstances?" When one occurs at the end of a sentence, no comma is used, but if one occurs at the beginning of a sentence, a comma should be used to join it to the independent clause.

When he graduated from high school, James decided that Harvard was the school for him.
"When he graduated from college" is a dependent adverb clause answering (obviously) the question "When?"

James decided that Harvard was the school for him when he graduated from high school.
Because the adverb clause comes at the end of the sentence, it does not require a comma.

Introductory phrases

If you are introducing something, put a comma after the word or phrase you are using (this includes transitional words like however, nevertheless, likewise, furthermore, etc. If these words occur any place other than the beginning of the sentence, they should be set off with commas).* Introductory phrases can be prepositional, past-participial, present-participial, infinitive, or absolute phrases.**

In 1997, Harry's cat spontaneously combusted.
"In 1997" is a prepositional phrase.

Walking being my favorite activity, I decided to go hiking for an afternoon.
"Walking being my favorite activity" is an absolute phrase.

Moving as quickly as possible, we got to our dorm and out of the cold.
"Moving as quickly as possible" is a present participial phrase.

*See our Semicolons handout for more information.

**See our Phrases handout for more information.

Parenthetical Expressions

A parenthetical is like a side note, adding extra information to sentences. The types of parenthetical expressions are appositives, expressions of contrast, direct address, and tag sentences.

Appositives and Restrictive/Non-restrictive Modifiers

An appositive is anything that renames or describes a noun and should be placed inside commas (an adjective clause). However, if the descriptive element is restrictive, it should not be placed inside commas.

Appositive:

Mr. Anderson, her orthodontist, says that Kara needs braces.

The phrase "her orthodontist" renames Mr. Anderson, so it is set off in commas.

Non-restrictive modifier:

Wuzzles, who have bellybuttons, are green.

This sentence says that all wuzzles have bellybuttons.

Restrictive modifier:

Wuzzles who have bellybuttons are green.

The sentence is saying that only those wuzzles who have bellybuttons are green, but not all wuzzles are green.

Expressions of Contrast

Expressions of contrast are exactly what they say they are--anything that says what something is not. These should be set off with commas.

The house needs to be painted now, not next week.

Annuals, although they only live for one season, are lovely flowers.

Direct Address

Any time you address a person (as often is done in dialogue), you should put commas around the person's name.

Matthew, go to bed.

You, Mr. Glaston, are guilty.

Tag Sentences

A tag sentence comes after an independent clause and has a verb and a pronoun. Tag sentences are often questions, but not always. These should be set off with commas and ended with the appropriate punctuation.

The meeting is at four o'clock today, I think.

The play was absolutely wonderful, wasn't it?

Interjections

An interjection is a word or words that show emotion. When you use interjections, you should set them off with a comma, unless you are using them alone. If you use one alone, you should punctuate it with an exclamation point.

Oh no! The cat escaped again!
Uh-oh, our project is going to be late.

Quoted Elements

When writing dialogue or including quotations in your paper, it is a good idea to introduce the quotations, but don't forget to use a comma!

Mr. Wigglesworth said, "She isn't going to buy *that*, is she?"

You would not use a comma, however, if you are paraphrasing something or only using part of a quotation.

Paraphrase:

Karin Lockhart believes that one should always sing to one's plants.

Partial Quotation:

In his book, Kory describes how he feels "a good monkey should always behave."

Commas with Cities and States

You should always have a comma between a city and a state, and if the city and state are in the middle of the sentence, you include a comma after the state as well.

My family moved from Lunenburg, Massachusetts, to Trophy Club, Texas, in 1989.

Dates

When you write dates with the month first, you will have a comma between the day and the year. If you write it with the day first, no comma is needed. If the date is within a sentence, a comma should come after the year as well.

July, 12, 1772
2 December 1904
January 24, 2001, was a great day!

Final Notes

Commas can sometimes be debatable, but the placement depends a great deal on how you, as the author, want your piece to be read. However, that does not mean that the above rules can be ignored.