



Dallas Baptist University Writing Center

Notes on commas

Notes on Commas #

The second comma in non-restrictive elements:

After three years as a Writing Center tutor at DBU there is no doubt in my mind that the most recurrent error in the use of the English language today is putting a comma in front of a restrictive element and leaving out the comma following the non-restrictive element:

restrictive element: a portion of a sentence that is *grammatically necessary* to complete the meaning of the sentence.

non-restrictive element: a portion of a sentence that is *not grammatically necessary* to complete the meaning of the sentence.

The most common misuse of commas surrounding the non-restrictive element occurs in the use of *appositives, adjectival dependent clauses, shorter adjectival or adverbial notes, years, states/countries, and titles*. Commas can also be *left out after the non-restrictive element*, and *nearby commas can cause confusion*.

Incorrect Example (appositives; one missing comma):

George W. Bush, the president spoke to Tony Blair.

The subject of the sentence is George W. Bush. The comma goes both before and after the president; the president is an explanation added on to George W. Bush to explain a little bit more about the subject. The writer has an instinct to put a comma in front of the president to show that the president is not really part of the essential grammar of the sentence. In other words, the comma makes it clear that the president is a sort of parenthetical notation.

So you can see the big problem with having a first comma and not having a second one; it's like having a first parenthesis and not a second: George W. Bush (the president spoke to Tony Blair). Since no comma is provided to indicate the end of the parenthetical comment, the closing parenthesis is understood to not occur until the end of the sentence. You end up with a subject, George W. Bush, and then a bunch of information in parentheses; according to the comma, the sentence doesn't even have a verb!

Correct Example (appositives; no missing commas):

George W. Bush, the president, spoke to Tony Blair.

Adding the comma before and after it is like opening and closing the parentheses in the right places. This sentence means this: George W. Bush (the president) spoke to Tony Blair.

This same problem applies to all of the following examples of a comma preceding a non-restrictive element without a comma following the non-restrictive element.

Incorrect Example (adjectival dependent clauses; one missing comma):

The guinea pig, which is a cute and fuzzy specimen of rodent makes a great pet.

The guinea pig is the subject of the sentence. which is a cute and fuzzy specimen of rodent is a dependent clause added onto the subject basically as an adjectival description; adding the comma in front of which is a cute and fuzzy specimen of rodent designates it as a sidenote; to show when the sidenote is finished, you need to add a comma after it as well.

Correct Example (adjectival dependent clauses; no missing commas):

The guinea pig, which is a cute and fuzzy specimen of rodent, makes a great pet.

In this sentence, it is clear both where the sidenote begins and where it ends.

Incorrect Example (shorter adjectival or adverbial notes; one missing comma):

The labrador, black and happy is a noble beast.

The labrador is the subject. black and happy is a basically adjectival phrase added on to the subject of the sentence. The comma in front of black and happy designates it as a parenthetical description of The labrador, a description without which the sentence would still make sense. But if you leave out the comma after black and happy then your sentence will never really let the reader know when the parenthetical description is over.

Correct Example (shorter adjectival notes; no missing commas):

The labrador, black and happy, is a noble beast.

With commas both before and after black and happy the reader can easily see both the beginning and the end of the parenthetical description.

(Note that the period at the end of a sentence makes the comma unnecessary if the non-restrictive element comes at the end of the sentence: A noble beast is the labrador, black and happy.)

Incorrect Example (years; one missing comma):

January 4, 2001 was a lovely day.

If you have a comma in front of the year you're required to have one after the year as well. January 4 is the subject, and 2001 is something extra added onto the grammar; basically, it's an adjective that describes the subject.

Correct Example (years; no missing commas):

January 4, 2001, was a lovely day.

Putting commas on both sides of the year is the correct way to write dates like this. You need to treat the parenthetical sidenote the same on both sides; the first comma announces the beginning of the parenthetical description; the second comma announces the end of the parenthetical description.

Correct Example (different way of writing years; no commas required):

4 January 2001 was a lovely day.

If the day comes before the month, you're supposed to leave out both commas. This is because 4 January 2001 is considered, as a whole, to be the subject of the sentence. (If there's an actual reason for this, they never told me what it is.)

Incorrect Example (states or countries; one missing comma):

Friendswood, Texas was founded by Quakers.

The subject of the sentence is Friendswood. Texas is added next to Friendswood to explain where it's located, but it's not the real subject; it's, once again, more of a parenthetical notation, a sidenote--at least from the grammatical perspective.

Correct example (states or countries; no missing commas):

Friendswood, Texas, was founded by Quakers.

The subject is still the same: Friendswood. Now that Texas is properly separated on both sides by commas, it's clear where the parenthetical notation begins and ends.

Bad use of Commas (titles; one comma present, one missing):

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great leader.

I take Martin Luther King to be the subject of the sentence, and Jr. to be a short description describing Martin Luther King. As such, it should be set apart properly on *both sides* by a comma.

Okay use of commas (titles; no commas present):

Martin Luther King Jr. was a great leader.

Many very intelligent, very well-educated people think that Jr. is part of the name. If you take this view, you'd have to write it like the above, with no commas on either side of Jr. Note that people who take this view agree that putting a comma in front of Jr. but not after is very bad. From this point of view, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great leader. is a lot like putting a comma before a person's last name: Martin Luther, King, was a neat guy. Putting a comma in the middle of someone's name is not a very smart thing to do.

Best use of commas (titles; both commas present):

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great leader.

This is what I take to be the best understanding of Jr., treating it as a title instead of a name. This is a lot like a degree: William E. Bell, Ph.D., taught me about the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy."

There are two reasons I think this. *First*, even though it's hard to think of "Martin Luther King" without the "Jr." added on, what about "Herb Daniels, Jr."? Is "Jr." part of Daniels's name or is it a title? In other words, can you think of "Herbert Daniels" without thinking of "Herbert Daniels, Jr."? I think you can. The only reason Martin Luther King, Jr., is harder to think of without his title is that we always hear his name with the title. *Second*, the verb of a sentence has no strictly grammatical need for a "Jr." tacked onto its noun.

In non-restrictive elements, it's also possible to make a mistake by leaving out the first comma and including the second:

Incorrect Example (comma missing before non-restrictive element):

Golden retrievers a happy breed of dog, are often seen bounding gracelessly across open fields.

Setting aside a happy breed of dog from the main sentence (Golden retrievers are often seen . . .) is a good thing. But marking it at the tail end and not at the front is just as bad as marking it at the front and not at the back.

Correct Example (commas on both sides of non-restrictive element):

Golden retrievers, a happy breed of dog, are often seen bounding gracelessly across open fields.

This makes much more sense. The first example was like saying Golden retrievers a happy breed of dog are often seen That is simply ridiculous. With both commas it looks more like Golden retrievers (a happy breed of dog) are often seen

It's easy to get confused if you have a comma nearby the non-restrictive element that serves a different purpose:

Incorrect Example (nearby comma causes confusion; one comma missing):

There once was a brave knight, who, persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of a lovely princess.

persistently and tirelessly is a non-restrictive element and should have a comma after it if it has one in front of it. The first comma is used to separate the dependent clause (everything coming after who) from the independent clause, There once was a brave knight. When the author of this sentence got to the place where he needed to add the comma following the non-restrictive element, he didn't think he had to add any commas because he already had two; however, the first comma does *not* make up for the comma that should have followed persistently and tirelessly. Both of these commas are good commas, but the second one is a bad comma without its twin:

Correct Example (both commas included):

There once was a brave knight, who, persistently and tirelessly, sought the heart of a lovely princess.

The first comma announces the arrival of the dependent clause. The next two commas set apart the non-restrictive element persistently and tirelessly. (Our friend the brave knight will be back later: see the alternative use of the semicolon.)

Summary:

The really important rule in all such cases is to treat the non-restrictive element the same way on both sides: both before and after it. It's a bigger mistake to say January 4, 2001 was a lovely day than to say January 4 2001 was a lovely day. Even though more commas are actually missing in the second example, it's a lesser mistake because the commas aren't used half-heartedly, with the result that the non-restrictive element is set apart from the first part of the sentence but not from the rest of the sentence.

Comma splicing:

The comma splice gets a lot of negative press; this is, no doubt, because it is both a common and a very serious error. It's less common than the error described above, but it is *much* more serious. A comma splice is using a comma for a semicolon. This is bad because the comma is a fundamentally *weak* form of punctuation. The period, the semicolon, and the comma are all used for separating things. The period separates sentences, the semicolon separates independent clauses (usually; it has one alternate use), and the comma by itself separates parts of clauses. The comma is simply too weak to handle the separation of larger elements.

Incorrect Example (comma splicing):

The Orcs were defeated, the Elves sang until dawn.

There are two independent clauses here, one about Orcs being defeated and one about Elves singing until dawn. Some loser (me) had the audacity to separate these with a lowly comma. A comma is too weak to separate two independent clauses.

Correct Example (semicolon):

The Orcs were defeated; the Elves sang until dawn.

The semicolon is strong enough to separate two independent clauses.

Correct Example (comma plus conjunction):

The Orcs were defeated, **and** the Elves sang until dawn.

A *comma working alone* is too weak, but if a comma gets a little help from a friendly conjunction like and, together they're quite strong enough to provide the right relation between the two independent clauses.

Comma between subject and verb:

Putting a comma between a subject and a verb is a dangerous thing. Read this sentence:

Incorrect Example (comma uselessly obstructs flow of sentence):

The guinea pigs, ate their lettuce happily.

The comma's purpose is to separate elements of a sentence. This is a ridiculous situation, where the comma is used to separate the subject from its verb.

Correct Example (un-obstructed sentence flow):

The guinea pigs ate their lettuce happily.

This is a *much better* sentence. It doesn't have anything getting in the way by separating the subject from the verb. But this is a more common error than you might think . . .

Incorrect Example (comma usefully obstructs flow of sentence):

The numerous fuzzy guinea pigs of multi-shaded diversity of typical rodent coloration, ate their lettuce happily.

Note that the situation is the same: a comma gets in between the subject and the verb, obstructing the flow of the sentence. This is incorrect. However, in sentences that have a subject made up of a lot of words, a comma can be very useful in letting the reader know the subject is over and it's time for the verb. This is a situation where adding a comma is technically incorrect; however, breaking the rules can aid communication. I don't often advise breaking the rules of the English language. But for those of you who already plan on doing so, this is one of the more useful ways to break the rules.

Correct Example (un-obstructed sentence flow):

The numerous fuzzy guinea pigs in all their multi-shaded diversity of typical rodent coloration ate their lettuce happily.

Optional commas in lists:

The last comma in a list is sometimes called the **serial comma**. It proceeds a conjunction (usually "and").

Example (using serial comma):

I like to eat apples, pizza, fried chicken, and cantaloupe.

Example (using serial comma):

I have never visited Albania, Spain, Andorra, or Bosnia.

Opinions differ as to whether it's appropriate to use the serial comma. Most authorities prefer the serial comma, but not using it is hardly a grievous error:

Example (not using serial comma):

I like to eat apples, pizza, fried chicken and cantaloupe.

The golden rule is *consistency*; either *all* your lists in an essay, paper, or article should use the serial comma, or else *none* of them should. However, I personally recommend using the serial comma because there are occasions where the serial comma removes ambiguity.

Unclear Writing Example (no serial comma; subject noun is ambiguous):

It was the time of the Elves, the Hobbits, the Dwarves and the Ents and one man led the hopeless assault on Mordor.

Who led the assault on Mordor? Was it the Ents and the one man? Was it just the one man?

Clear Writing Example (serial comma removes ambiguity):

It was the time of the Elves, the Hobbits, the Dwarves, and the Ents and one man led the hopeless assault on Mordor.

This is *much better*. Now we can tell who led the assault on Mordor. See what the last comma does? It tells you that the Ents are part of that whole clause about whose time it was; now it's clear that it's the one man who led the assault on Mordor. (Good for the one man! Down with Mordor!) But this sentence could still be a bit more clear. It would be a better sentence if that poor, lonely conjunction that brings together the independent clauses had some help from a friendly comma to give them an element of separation:

It was the time of the Elves, the Hobbits, the Dwarves, and the Ents, and one man led the hopeless assault on Mordor.

The comma makes clearer where the next clause begins.

The alternative use of the semicolon:

The main use of the semicolon is connecting independent clauses. There is, however, one function of a semicolon that doesn't have anything to do with connecting two independent clauses. Try to remember that a semicolon is a lot like a strong comma.

Example without semicolon usage:

The brave knight slaughtered the dragon, rescued the princess, wrote her a Shakespearean sonnet, and, in the end, won her heart.

There are no grammatical errors or irregularities in the above sentence. The first three commas separate elements in a list (the serial comma is used). The next two commas surround in the end, which is an adverbial non-restrictive element.

Note that the items in the list are not just one-word nouns. They are whole predicates: first, slaughtered the dragon; second, rescued the princess; third, wrote her a Shakespearean sonnet; fourth, in the end, won her heart. When you have multi-word items in a list, it's acceptable (and often recommended) to use semicolons in place of commas:

Example with semicolon usage:

The brave knight slaughtered the dragon; rescued the princess; wrote her a Shakespearean sonnet; and, in the end, won her heart.

The justification of this is that a semicolon is like a strong comma. The comma's purpose is to separate elements of independent clauses, but when those elements are big elements the job gets a little bit bigger. The comma is still able to do its work in these situations, but the semicolon is allowed to step in and take over.

Using a semicolon in situations like this is, like I said, often recommended:

Example with semicolon usage (semicolons relieve ambiguity):

I like to eat pizza, pineapples, and apples; I drink tea and Dr. Pepper; I enjoy cruising for chicks at the mall; and I read Tolkien, Dostoyevsky, Plato, and Kierkegaard.

Just imagine what a nightmare this would be if a few of the commas hadn't been upgraded to semicolons! A comma is still technically able to handle this sort of sentence, and separate multi-worded elements of a list (even when the elements are independent clauses); but it would be so hard to tell when one element of the list ended and another began because there are so many words in each element, and because some of the elements include their own lists!

Commas and subordinating conjunctions:

A **subordinating conjunction** is used to set apart a dependent clause from an independent clauses; for example, After is a subordinating conjunction in the sentence After a nation's economy has been surpassed by foreign economies first in manufacturing and second in entertainment, it is arguable that having the best universities will ensure a country's economic prosperity through the marketability of information. Although a comma is usually involved with sentences that use subordinating conjunctions, it's easy to put the comma in the wrong place. It's *especially* easy with the coordinating conjunction 'although.' In dependent clauses using 'although,' *the comma always goes between the two clauses*, but writers are often tempted to put the comma after the 'although.'

The 'although' dependent clause can come before or after its independent clause . . .

Example (dependent clause precedes independent clause; comma would improve sentence):

Although the Democratic Party is the heir of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans the contemporary Democrat prefers Rousseau's theory of government to Jefferson's.

Although here is a subordinating conjunction. In a situation like the one above, a comma is usually useful for separating the 'although' clause from the other clause:

Correct Example (dependent clause precedes independent clause; comma provided):

Although the Democratic Party is the heir of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans, the contemporary Democrat prefers Rousseau's theory of government to Jefferson's.

Although designates the first clause, the one that begins with **Although the Democratic Party**, as being a dependent clause to the independent clause, the one that begins with the contemporary Democrat. When the 'although' occurs at the beginning of a sentence, it's usually not too hard to know where to put the comma. However, when the 'although' occurs in the middle of the sentence, it's a lot easier to make a mistake. This will happen when the dependent clause comes after the independent clause.

Incorrect Example (dependent clause follows independent clause; comma in wrong place):

The contemporary Democrat prefers Rousseau's theory of government to Jefferson's **although**, the Democratic Party is the heir of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans.

The author of this sentence probably got confused by thinking that the comma needs to work with the **although**. This is not quite true. The comma doesn't work with the subordinating conjunction; its purpose is to set apart the dependent clause from the independent clause. So it will *always* come right before the dependent clause. Since the dependent clause in this sentence starts with **although**, the comma needs to come right before it:

Correct Example (dependent clause follows independent clause; comma correctly precedes dependent clause):

The contemporary Democrat prefers Rousseau's theory of government to Jefferson's, **although** the Democratic Party is the heir of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans.

Optional commas for dependent clauses: a matter of emphasis:

Let's look yet again at our friend the brave knight:

Example (comma makes independent clause more important):

There once was a brave knight, who persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of a lovely princess.

This comma announces the arrival of the dependent clause starting with who. In this sentence, the main idea communicated is that There once was a brave knight. That's it.

Example (no comma; dependent clause equally important):

There once was a brave knight who persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of a lovely princess.

Without the comma the main idea communicated by the sentence is not just that there was this brave knight, but that he did something: he persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of a lovely princess. Both sentences are grammatically flawless. But be aware that *using a comma to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause makes the information communicated in the dependent clause less important. Leaving the comma out makes the information communicated by the dependent clause at least as important as that communicated by the independent clause.*

So if you want to emphasize the information in the dependent clause as being just as important as the rest of the sentence: you should usually leave the comma out.

Commas between independent clauses:

One of the ways of putting two independent clauses into one sentence is by using a coordinating conjunction and a comma.

Plato said that the forms exist in themselves Aristotle felt that the forms exist in the things of this world.

We have two independent clauses here in this run-on sentence, and they have to be made to fit together *somehow*. We need to *join* them with a coordinating conjunction (assuming we don't want to make them into two separate sentences or to separate them with a semicolon). A **coordinating conjunction** is defined as a conjunction that joins two things that are grammatically equivalent. Since the comma's purpose is *separation*, the comma can be useful for *setting the second independent clause apart from the first*, while the coordinating conjunction *joins the two*. When two independent clauses are brought together, they always need to be *connected* with a coordinating conjunction; they often also need to be *set apart* from each other by a comma.

The most common coordinating conjunction is *and*:

Plato said that the forms exist in themselves **and** Aristotle felt that the forms exist in the things of this world.

If we want to separate the two concepts that we've brought together with a coordinating conjunction, we can use a comma, . . .

Plato said that the forms exist in themselves, **and** Aristotle felt that the forms exist in the things of this world.

. . . but that doesn't necessarily mean that they *have* to be separated. The conjunction and comma serve disparate purposes. One *connects* the two independent clauses (the coordinating conjunction), and one *separates* (the comma). So a *comma* is not always necessary when the two clauses are closely related and

don't need to be separated. If you don't want the two clauses to be understood as being separate, there is not always a good reason to add the comma.

Example (comma acceptably omitted from sentence with two short clauses):

I read the book and I returned it to the library.

Example (comma used in sentence with two longer clauses):

She never trusts the sneaky Moonpeople, **and** it is both prudent and wise of her not to do so.

You'll never make a mistake by including the comma before the coordinating conjunction (keep reading: you *will* lose out on useful ways of saying things). You really do need the comma sometimes to relieve ambiguity:

Example (comma left out; sentence is ambiguous):

'Magic' in the fantasy fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien is either left as a mystery or given the general explanation that magic is inherent in things that exist such as the Elves **and** in the fantasy of Terry Brooks 'magic' is explained in an almost scientific analysis of the energy that is present in the universe.

It's not as clear where the second independent clause begins as it could be if we added a comma:

Example (comma included; ambiguity is relieved):

'Magic' in the fantasy fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien is either left as a mystery or given the general explanation that magic is inherent in things that exist such as the Elves, **and** in the fantasy of Terry Brooks 'magic' is explained in an almost scientific analysis of the energy that is present in the universe.

The main reason to use the comma as well as the coordinating conjunction is that the reader often has trouble telling where the second independent clause begins. This tends to happen when the clauses are longer. Often people like nerds and English teachers see two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction connecting them, and we think a comma is needed to help out the coordinating conjunction do its work. Sometimes people like that ask ourselves why we want a comma there, and we think that the coordinating conjunction isn't *strong enough* to do its work on its own; but that doesn't even make any sense, since the comma *separates* and the coordinating conjunction *joins*. The only real reasons to have a comma are when the two clauses need to be separated for clarity (as above), or when the two clauses are just not logically that close.

If the two clauses are longer independent clauses and are still closely related, using or not using the comma can be very useful. Not only is it *not always necessary* to help out the coordinating conjunction with a comma; it's also *stifling* to always use the comma. Here's why: knowing when to use and when not to use the optional comma allows for subtle but meaningful differences in your sentence:

When one clause describes the other: a matter of emphasis:

When the action in the second independent clause describes the action in the first independent clause, you can use a comma along with the conjunction if you want to emphasize the first independent clause as the main idea of the sentence:

Example (first independent clause carries main idea of sentence):

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU, and they carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

In this situation, the Goblins attacking DBU is the main idea. What they did when they attacked is not so important.

If you want to emphasize the second independent clause as being just as important as the first independent clause, leave out the comma and let the conjunction do its work all by itself:

Example (equal emphasis on both independent clauses):

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU and they carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

In this sentence, because there is no comma separating the two independent clauses, the nature of their attack (carrying off all the red cars) is just as important as the fact that the Goblins attacked. (Lousy Goblins.)

When the events of the two clauses are separate: a matter of separate vs. unified events:

If the second independent clause describes something that happens separately from the action in the first independent clause, using a comma in front of the conjunction can separate the action in the second independent clause—with both clauses being equally important.

The Goblins came, and the Goblins left.

In this sentence, the fact that the Goblins came is separated by a comma from the fact that the Goblins left. It's a little bit like saying The Goblins came; the Goblins left, because the comma draws a line of separation between the two clauses.

The Goblins came and the Goblins left.

In this sentence, the fact that the Goblins came and the fact that they left are of equal importance. This is a little bit like saying The Goblins came and left because, without a comma, the action in the first clause is closely related to the action in the second clause.

Summary of different emphases, from the least emphasis on the second independent clause to the most emphasis:

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU, carrying off all the red cars in the parking lot.

(*Strongest* sense of subordination for second clause.)

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU, and they carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

(*Stronger* sense of subordination for second clause; second clause informs first clause.)

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU and they carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

(*Weak* sense of subordination for second clause; second clause stands on its own.)

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU; they carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

(*Weaker* sense of subordination for second clause.)

The Mountain Creek Goblins attacked DBU. They carried off all the red cars in the parking lot.

(*Weakest* sense of subordination for second clause.)

Optional commas for adjectival and adverbial notes: a matter of emphasis:

That brave knight just won't leave us alone . . .

Example (adverbial; manner of seeking princess de-emphasized):

There once was a brave knight who, persistently and tirelessly, sought the heart of a lovely princess.

Setting apart persistently and tirelessly with commas makes the manner in which he sought her heart less important than the fact that the brave knight sought the heart of the princess.: The brave knight sought the heart of the princess; oh, and by the way, he was persistent and tireless in his efforts.

Example (adverbial; manner of seeking princess emphasized):

There once was a brave knight who persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of a lovely princess.

Leaving out the commas makes the manner of seeking her heart just as important as the fact that he sought her heart: The brave knight persistently and tirelessly sought the heart of the princess.

Now for an adjectival example . . .

Example (adjectival; type of UWC employee a sidenote):

A Writing Center employee, filled with knowledge of commas, launched a devastating attack on bad grammar via the internet.

Commas set apart filled with knowledge of commas from the rest of sentence. This means that it's sort of a sidenote: The UWC employee attacked bad grammar; by the way, he knew about commas.

Example (adjectival; type of UWC employee emphasized):

A Writing Center employee filled with knowledge of commas launched a devastating attack on bad grammar via the internet.

There are no commas setting apart filled with knowledge of commas from the rest of the sentence. This makes the nature of the UWC employee (that he knew about commas) very important to the fact that he's attacking bad grammar on the internet; maybe it's the reason he's attacking it; maybe it's his primary weapon. Either way, his knowledge of commas has *something* important to do with the attack. Both of these examples are okay grammatically. You can take your pick in these situations; it just depends on what you want to emphasize. What sort of weirdo is this guy, anyway? Only losers know all about commas

. . . .

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