

## 33) Commas: Almost Everything You Need to Know

**1. Introductory Elements**—Use a comma after introductory adverb clauses, participial phrases, long prepositional phrases, or elements that precede the main clause in a sentence.

**Examples:** Six days after the warranty expired, the car broke down.  
Gazing across the channel, Matt listened to the tide come in.  
Hidden in the gnarled brush, the thrush flung forth its soul in song.  
In many instances, the comma after an introductory phrase gets overlooked.  
Yes, you should try to memorize these comma rules.  
However, you should keep this handout close in case you forget.

**2. Interrupters**—Use commas around elements that interrupt the sense of the main clause and do not add essential information (often called nonrestrictive modifiers). You must differentiate between a nonrestrictive and a restrictive modifier (one that adds essential information) in order to determine whether or not you need commas to set it off.

**Examples:** The town, which was below sea level, was flooded. (nonrestrictive—indicates that we need to know only that the town was flooded)  
The town that was below sea level was flooded. (restrictive—indicates that we must know the altitude of the town to understand the meaning of the sentence)  
Amy Nguyen, a poet from Vietnam, recently published her second collection of verse. (nonrestrictive—an appositive phrase renames or stands for a preceding noun)

NOTE: Commas around interrupters come in pairs. If you use one comma, you must have a second one.

**Examples:** The team, exhausted after the grueling game, filed onto the bus.  
The formula, which is on page 38, will solve all of your problems.  
No one, not even the people on the front row, could see the film.

**3. Afterthoughts**—Use a comma before an element that comes after the main clause in a sentence and is nonrestrictive. The element may be helpful in expressing a certain idea; however, it is not an essential part of the sentence.

**Examples:** We foraged through the refrigerator, searching for artichokes.  
The wind beat against the lonely child, who was huddled beneath the awning.  
No one knew the correct answer, not even the professor.  
The dealer drew our attention to the latest models, glistening beneath the spotlight.

**4. Compound Sentences**—Use a comma before the coordinating conjunction (and, but, yet, so, for, or, nor) that separates the two independent clauses in a compound sentence.

**Examples:** It is bad enough that the sidewalks are in such horrible condition, but it is even worse that the streets are full of potholes.  
Dangerous chemical substances are polluting our water supplies, and debris is piling up outside our doors.

**NOTE:** Do not make the mistake of throwing in a comma before every coordinating conjunction. Only use a comma if the conjunction joins two independent clauses.

**Example:** Dangerous chemical substances are polluting our water supplies and are killing the marine life. (Here, *and* joins two verbs (*are polluting* and *are killing*), not two independent clauses.)

**5. Items in a Series**—Use a comma between each item in a series of three or more items (don't forget the comma before the conjunction joining the last two items in the series).

**Examples:** Coke, Pepsi, and RC manufacture carbonated beverages.  
The vandals had torn the screens from the window, shattered the glass, and entered the cabin. Diedrich, Geoffrey, Humphrey, and Washington were the pseudonyms he used.  
I am concerned with the following issues: punctuating correctly, using parallelism, and capitalizing all proper nouns.

**6. Equal Modifiers**—Use a comma between two modifiers of the same type that are modifying the same word. One test to see whether you have equal modifiers is to insert the word *and* between the modifiers. If this insertion can be made without altering the meaning of the sentence, the modifiers are considered equal. They should be separated with a comma.

**Examples:** The dull, mildewed walls were covered with antique carvings.  
A white-shouldered, broad-browed maiden opened the gate.  
Jay could not see that Daisy was a self-centered, egotistical socialite.

**7. Parenthetical Expressions**—Use a comma to set off conjunctive adverbs (however, therefore, moreover), transitional phrases (in contrast, on the other hand), parenthetical remarks (in fact, more importantly), tag questions and sentences, and statements of contrast.

**Examples:** The hailstorm last week, on the other hand, caused severe damage. (transitional expression)  
In fact, the hailstorm was so powerful that it broke a dozen priceless stained glass windows on the west side of the church. (parenthetical remark as interrupter)  
We should not be surprised, therefore, if someone takes up a collection for the window's repair. (conjunctive adverb)  
We should be ready to contribute to the cause even if we don't attend church, shouldn't we? (tag question)

This is the right key, I think. (tag statement)

The windows' beauty touched all of us in the community, not just the church members.  
(statement of contrast)

**8. Direct Address and Mild Interjections**—Use a comma with these types of interrupters in a sentence. They act as nonrestrictive elements in a sentence because they are not essential to a sentence's meaning.

**Examples:** We have finished this project, Mr. Smith, without any help from your foundation.  
(direct address)

Joey, I think you should check this out. I also think you need to look at it, Frank. (direct address)

Yes, we must leave this evening. (interjection)

**9. Absolute Phrases**—Use a comma to set off absolute phrases in a sentence. An absolute phrase consists of a noun and a participle, and it modifies the entire sentence.

**Examples:** The snake slithered through the tall grass, the sunlight shining now and then on its green skin. (the phrase following the comma is the absolute phrase modifying the whole sentence)

**10. Introducing Quotations**—If you introduce or conclude a quotation with words identifying its source or by explaining the context, you must use a comma.

**Examples:** At the grand opening, he said, "This facility is dedicated to the physical and mental health of the citizens of Oakdale." (introduction of a quotation)  
"Some books are meant to be chewed," said Francis Bacon, "and others to be digested."  
(the explanatory words here interrupt the quotation and must be set off by commas)  
"The fire doors need to be replaced before the school can be reopened," the commissioner wrote. (identifier at conclusion of sentence)

NOTE: Do not use a comma if your explanation of a quotation ends with *that*. Likewise, if the words that introduce the quotation form a complete sentence, do not use a comma. Use a colon instead.

**Examples:** Lorene Cary begins her story by saying that "they had just come home from Woolworth's, where they both worked at the cheap-and-greasy fountain on Friday nights and Saturdays in a town they and their friends called 'Tacky' Darby."  
Ms. Johnson responded to criticism of the sales campaign: "For a program launched in the middle of a recession, sales were actually quite strong."

**11. Making Your Meaning Clear**—Use commas to make the meaning of your sentence clear, even if there is no specific rule governing use of the comma.

**Examples:** Anyone who can afford to buy this high-speed file management program, should. (The comma here reminds readers that some words have been omitted and that *should* actually means *should do so*.)  
Under the tree he found his puppy, and under the car, his cat. (This sentence omits *he found* after the second comma.)

**12. Common Comma Confusion**—When you combine two independent clauses without using any punctuation or conjunctions, you create a **fused sentence**.

**Example:** The departure time has come we must leave immediately.

NOTE: Do not "fix" the fused sentence by adding only a comma, or you create a **Comma Splice**—two independent clauses joined only with a comma.

**Example:** The departure time has come, we must leave immediately.

Correct fused sentences and comma splices using one of the following methods:

- a. The departure time has come. We must leave immediately.
- b. The departure time has come; we must leave immediately.
- c. The departure time has come: we must leave immediately.
- d. The departure time has come, so we must leave immediately.
- e. The departure time has come; therefore, we must leave immediately

### 13. Additional Comma Rules

- a. Dates: July 4, 1984, is my birthday. I was born on 4 July 1986.
- b. Addresses: I live at 2601 Main Street, Joplin, Missouri 64804.
- c. City/State: He lives in Seneca, Missouri.
- d. Titles: Ralph H. White, M.D.
- e. Salutations and closers: Dear Jack, Sincerely yours,
- f. Sets of numbers: 22,005,785,116

## MISPLACED COMMAS

The following examples demonstrate situations when a **comma is either not needed or is simply put in the wrong place.**

1. Putting a comma **between a subject and a verb**, is not a good idea.
2. Many teachers have stated, **that a comma should not separate a verb from its direct object.**
3. In a series, never put a comma, **before the first element**, inappropriately within elements, or **after the last element**, in the list.
4. A phrase, **that functions as a restrictive element**, should not be set off with commas.
5. If your sentence ends with an **essential adverb clause**, don't put a comma before **it**, because your meaning will be obscured.
6. It is better to use no commas at **all**, than to use one **before the word than**.
7. Although, **you may think that subordinating conjunctions** require commas directly following them, they do not. People often make this mistake because they confuse subordinating conjunctions (although, when, since, etc.) with conjunctive adverbs (however, therefore, etc.) and transitional expressions (for example).
8. While you worry about your **dark, blue, pen** running out of ink, try to remember not to put a comma **between adjectives you cannot reverse or between an adjective and the noun it modifies.**
9. "Why don't you need a comma **after a question mark?**" she asked. "For the same reason you don't need one **after an exclamation point in quotations!**" the teacher replied.
10. If you are tempted to place a comma **before a parenthesis**, (an urge to which too many people succumb), try to hold yourself back.
11. You might want to put a comma **after a coordinating conjunction**, **but**, you only need one before it.