



Comma Rules

When do I really need a comma?

For the most part, commas are used for one of three reasons: separation, enclosure, or convention.

Separation.

A) Items in a series should be separated by a comma.

The breakfast special comes with two eggs, sausage, homefries, coffee, and juice.

Note that some people consider the comma between the second-to-last items and the conjunction *and* (in this case *coffee, and juice*) optional. In formal writing, it's best to include this comma.

If all the items in a series are joined by conjunctions, no commas are necessary.

The special includes eggs and sausage and homefries.

B) Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction to separate independent clauses. An independent clause is a word group that can stand alone as a sentence, and there are special rules for joining them together. One way is to use a comma and one of seven coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so* (think FANBOYS).

The work is hard, but the pay is good.

Both *the work is hard* and *the pay is good* could stand alone as individual sentences. To join them together, use a comma and the coordinating conjunction *but*. The conjunction is very important. If you leave it out, you will have a **comma splice** (for more information, see the Learning Center handout on Comma Splices).

Don't use a comma if the half of a sentence connected with a conjunction cannot stand alone:

The work is hard but pays well. (pays well could not stand alone as a sentence).

C) Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not joined by *and*. (When two or more adjectives modify the same noun separately, they are said to be "coordinate.")

The statue depicts a strong, beautiful, heroic figure.

Strong, beautiful, and heroic each describe the *figure* independently of one another.

If two or more adjectives **don't** modify a noun separately, they are not coordinating, but "cumulative" and no commas are needed.

The large black marble statue sits in the town square.

Large, black, and marble combine to describe the statue. The difference can be subtle.

Enclosure.

A) Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase that tells when, where, or under what conditions the action takes place.

When the highway was completed, the small town nearly doubled in size.

The clause *when the highway was completed* introduces the sentence by telling when the town doubled in size.

Note that the subject and verb of the main sentence come after the comma and could stand alone as a sentence, but the introductory clause could not.

Don't use a comma when the clause or phrase ends a sentence: *The small town nearly doubled in size when the highway was completed.*

B) Use a comma to introduce direct quotations with such words as *she said, he explained, she wrote:*

*Einstein said, "You cannot simultaneously prepare for and prevent a war."
"At no time," ordered the commander, "should anyone leave the base alone."*

C) Nonessential (or nonrestrictive) elements of a sentence (clauses and phrases that could be removed and not change the essential meaning of the sentence) should be enclosed within commas. Such clauses may begin with *which, who, whose, that, where or when.*

The English class, which is required for graduation, is only offered in the fall.

The phrase *which is required for graduation* isn't essential to the sentence's meaning, but adds more information. The sentence would still make sense without the phrase.

However, if the clause is essential (restrictive) to the meaning of the sentence, no commas are needed:

The English class required for graduation is only offered in the fall.

D) An **appositive** is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun.

Sam Spartan, mascot of Northampton Community College, will lead the parade.

The fact that Sam Spartan is the NCC mascot is not essential to the point of the sentence, and even if the appositive were removed, we would still know exactly who will be leading the parade. The appositive phrase is therefore nonessential (or nonrestrictive), and should be enclosed within commas.

E) Transitional expressions, words and phrases such as *however, as a matter of fact, in the first place, certainly, in other words*, modify an entire sentence and help to link ideas together. These transitional expressions must be set off with commas.

The decision, in other words, is entirely up to you.

Note that when a transitional expression links two independent clauses, the first should be separated from the second with a semicolon followed by the transitional expression and a comma:

You are not required to purchase the textbook; however, you will be responsible for all of the material covered in class.

Convention.

Finally, commas are used as a matter of convention in numbers, dates, times, and source citations.

A) Commas are usually used to separate the thousands and one hundreds in large numbers:

Over 500,000 people attended the concert.

B) In dates, the year is set off from the rest of the sentence by commas.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, marked the beginning of US involvement in World War II.

Commas are not needed if only the year or only the month and the year are given.

March 1996 was our busiest month yet.

C) The street, city, and country of an address are set off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

Jim Morrison's gravesite in Paris, France, is visited almost as often as the Eiffel Tower.

D) Titles. If a title follows a name, it should be set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

Frank Vossman, Ph.D., will give a lecture on the nesting habits of the European swallow.

E) Commas are important in separating various parts of source citations.

Kerrigan, William, and Gordon Braden. *The Idea of the Renaissance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.