



## Comma Rules

### ***When do I really need a comma?***

Many people get confused about when they need to use a comma and when they don't. A list of all the situations that require a comma is given below, but for the most part, we use commas for one of three reasons:

1. **Separation.** Two or more like items in a sentence should be separated by a comma.
2. **Enclosure.** Non-essential 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.
3. **Convention.** Finally, commas are used as a matter of convention in dates, times, and source citations.

### Examples

Of a comma used for separation:

*A computer usually consists of a CPU, a storage device, and some sort of output device.*

We are listing three components to the computer, so we separate them with commas.

Of a comma used for enclosure:

*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; it merely adds more information. If we were to remove the phrase, the sentence would still make sense. We enclose this non-essential information within commas.

Of a comma used as a matter of convention:

*Over 500,000 people attended the concert on August 16, 1969.*

Commas are usually used to separate the thousands and one hundreds in large numbers, and the day from the year in dates.

### ***So what are the rules?***

The list below is not meant to be all-inclusive. Instead, we've attempted to cover the rules you're likely to use most often in your academic writing. We've separated the rules into the categories suggested above.

### SEPARATION

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: *and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet.*

*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, we 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).*

Use a comma to separate items in a series.

When three or more items are discussed within a sentence, you should separate each with 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. For example: *The special includes eggs and sausage and homefries.* We generally wouldn't write a sentence this way unless there was a strong reason to do so, such as to add emphasis.

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.*

Each of these adjectives describes the *figure* independently of one another. If two or more adjectives don't modify a noun separately, they are not coordinating, but cumulative.

*The large black marble statue sits in the town square.*

No commas are needed to separate cumulative adjectives. The difference can be a bit subtle. If you aren't sure, ask your instructor or a writing tutor in the Learning Center.

Use a comma to introduce an introductory clause or phrase.

These groups of introductory words introduce a sentence by telling 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 us when the town doubled in size.

## ENCLOSURE

Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase that begins a sentence.

*After he was crowned, he was known as a benevolent king.*

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

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Don't use a comma when the clause or phrase ends a sentence:  
*He was known as a benevolent king after he was crowned.*

Use a comma with verbs of saying to enclose direct quotations.

You can introduce 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," said the commander, "should anyone leave the base alone."*

Use commas to enclose nonrestrictive elements of a sentence.

Clauses and phrases that are restrictive define or limit the meaning of the sentence, and are therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence. Nonrestrictive elements can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence. There are several types of nonrestrictive clauses and phrases.

### **Adjective Clauses and Phrases**

Adjective clauses look like sentences in that they have both subjects and verbs, but they function within sentences to describe nouns and pronouns. Adjective clauses begin with a relative pronoun, such as *which, who, whose, that*, etc, or with a relative adverb such as *where* or *when*. If an adjective clause is non-restrictive, it must be set off with a comma or commas.

*Dr. Forester, who teaches chemistry, will retire next year.*

Notice that the essential meaning of this sentence would not change if we removed the adjective clause *who teaches chemistry*.

*The professor who teaches that class is on sabbatical this year.*

In this sentence, the clause *who teaches that class* is essential to the meaning of the sentence (without it, your reader would not know which professor you were talking about). Restrictive adjective clauses should not be set off with commas.

Certain prepositional phrases and verbal phrases can also function within sentences to describe nouns and pronouns. These phrases may be either restrictive or nonrestrictive, and follow the same rules for comma usage.

*The white Chevy, with its radio blaring, pulled up beside me at the intersection.*

Note that the essential meaning of this sentence would not change if we removed the adjective phrase *with its radio blaring*.

*The car that was blaring its radio pulled up beside me at the intersection.*

Notice that the phrase *that was blaring its radio* is essential to the meaning of the sentence; without it, your reader wouldn't know which car you were talking about.

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

*Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under Richard Nixon, will speak at the commencement.*

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The fact that Henry Kissinger was once Secretary of State is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Even if the appositive were removed, we would still know exactly who will be speaking. The appositive phrase is therefore nonrestrictive, and should be enclosed within commas.

*Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger will speak at the commencement.*

In this sentence, *Henry Kissinger* is the appositive, and without it, the sentence would not be clear (There are many former Secretaries of State. To which one are we referring?).

Use a comma to enclose other interruptive elements within a sentence.

In general, a word, phrase, or clause that interrupts the basic thought of the sentence should be set off with a comma. Nonrestrictive adjective clauses and phrases (above) are interrupters. Some other common interrupters are listed below.

### **Transitional expressions.**

Words and phrases such as *however*, *as a matter of fact*, *in the first place*, *certainly*, *in other words*, and so on 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 together, you must separate the first 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**

### **Dates**

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.*

### **Addresses**

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.*

### **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 mating habits of the European swallow.*

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