



Rules for Using Commas

WHY USE A COMMA?

Commas serve a variety of uses, but their main purposes are to indicate a pause in the sentence or to clarify meaning for the reader.

TERMS TO KNOW TO UNDERSTAND COMMA RULES:

Clause: A group of words that contains both a subject and a verb

Example: Patrick loves music.

Types of clauses:

- **Independent clause:** A clause that contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence
 - *Example:* Jim studied for his chemistry quiz.
- **Dependent clause:** A clause that cannot stand alone as a sentence. Therefore, it depends on being linked with an independent clause to form a complete sentence.
 - *Example:* Jim studied for his chemistry quiz after he finished his English Composition essay.
- **Essential clause:** In a sentence with an ambiguous/general noun, an essential clause limits this noun and tells us “which one?”
 - *Example:* The woman who interviewed you is my sister.
- **Nonessential clause:** A clause that describes a noun, but is not necessary to define an ambiguous noun
 - *Example:* My uncle, who is eighty years old, walks three miles every day.

Coordinating conjunction: A word used to combine two independent clauses. You can remember the independent clauses with the acronym FANBOYS: **F**or, **A**nd, **N**or, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, **S**o

Example: Sarah is an undergraduate student, but she is already conducting independent research.

HOW TO USE COMMAS:

Dependent Clause: Do not put a comma after the main clause when it is followed by a dependent clause.

- *Example with mistake:* I walked to campus, while listening to music.
- *Correction:* I walked to campus while listening to music. [“I walked to campus” is the main clause. “While listening to music” is the dependent clause. You do not need a comma separating them.]

Compound sentences: A compound sentence contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. The comma is placed before the coordinating conjunction.

- *Example with mistake:* I like going to school but I don’t like doing homework.
- *Correction:* I like going to school, but I don’t like doing homework. [“I like going to school” and “I don’t like doing homework” are both independent clauses. They are joined by the coordinating conjunction “but.” The comma is necessary before “but.”]
- Note that logical connectors (meanwhile, however, nevertheless) cannot be used as coordinate conjunctions and are used instead at the beginning of a sentence.

Nonessential clauses vs. essential clauses: Do not separate essential clauses from the rest of the sentence with commas. Note that essential clauses often begin with “that.” Nonessential clauses should be separated with commas.

- *Example:* The book that I borrowed from you is excellent. [“That I borrowed from you” is an essential clause. Therefore, no commas are needed.]
- *Example:* Apples, which are my favorite fruit, are the main ingredient in this recipe. [“Which are my favorite fruit” is a nonessential clause, so it is set apart from the rest of the sentence with commas.]

Lists: Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series. You can, but do not need to, include the final comma if there is a conjunction.

- *Example:* I like to enjoy my evenings by relaxing, reading, and cooking in my kitchen. [This example uses the final comma.]
- *Example:* I like to enjoy my evenings by relaxing, reading and cooking in my kitchen. [This example does not use the final comma, but it is still correct.]

Quotations: Use commas to shift between the identifying clause and a quotation.

- *Example:* Mary said, “I’m going to the movies later.”
- *Example:* “I’m going to the movies later,” said Mary.
- *Example:* “I’m going,” said Mary, “to the movies later.”

Introductory clauses/phrases/words: A sentence often requires a word, phrase, or clause before the main idea in order to indicate cause and effect, time, contrast, or a transition of some kind. This is often a dependent clause. There is a comma separating the introductory clause/phrase/word from the main clause of the sentence.

- *Example:* Because I wanted to arrive to the concert on time, I left my house early. [“Because I wanted to arrive to the concert on time” is the introductory clause, so it is followed by a comma.]
- *Example:* Although I arrived on time, the Professor marked me tardy. [“Although I arrived on time” is the introductory clause, so it is followed by a comma.]
- *Example:* However, you may not be satisfied with the results. [“However” is the introductory word, so it is followed by a comma.]

End of sentence: Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.

- *Example:* The birds seemed menacing, almost evil.
- *Example:* He was vertically challenged, not short.

COMMON COMMA MISTAKES

Comma splicing: Do not join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction.

- *Example with mistake:* Patrick loves music, he plays in a band.
- *Correction:* Patrick loves music, so he plays in a band. [“Patrick loves music” and “he plays in a band” are both independent clauses, so they need to be joined with both a comma and a coordinating conjunction. Here, the coordinating conjunction is “so.”]

Dependent clause following an Independent clause: Do not put a comma after the main clause when a dependent clause follows it.

- *Example with mistake:* She went to the store, because she wanted to buy cookies.
- *Correction:* She went to the store because she wanted to buy cookies. [“She went to the store” is an independent clause, and “because she wanted to buy cookies” is a dependent clause. Do not use a comma to separate these clauses.]