

commas

Commas are tiny marks that can cause big problems. This handout will help you know when and how to use commas.

General Information

Most often, commas show readers how the words or phrases contained in a given sentence fit together. They also help to signify a break in the action or, for example, when a reader should pause. In addition, commas distinguish what information is absolutely necessary in a sentence.

The Oxford Comma

Also known as a **serial comma**, the Oxford comma is placed immediately before the conjunction—usually “and,” “or,” or “nor”—in a series of three or more terms.

Without the Oxford comma: Would you like steak, chicken or pork for dinner?

With the Oxford comma: Would you like steak, chicken, or pork for dinner?

While this might seem like a trivial distinction, the Oxford comma can eliminate confusion.

Confusing: I have invited my parents, Lloyd and Marilyn.

Note: Without the Oxford comma, it is not clear whether Lloyd and Marilyn are the parents or separate invitees. In other words, it is not clear if there are four invitees or two.

Better: I have invited my parents, Lloyd, and Marilyn.

Note: The Oxford comma makes it clear that Lloyd and Marilyn are separate invitees.

The 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* requires the Oxford comma.

Combining Elements

When combining elements, the comma indicates where one element ends and another begins.

Note: For more information on clauses, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Combining Independent Clauses

To join two independent clauses, you must use a comma and a coordinating conjunction, such as “and,” “but,” “or,” etc. Place the comma at the end of the first sentence, just before the conjunction.

Example: It’s terribly cold outside, but I think I’ll leave my jacket at home.



Note: For more ways to combine independent clauses, please see our [“Comma Splices”](#) or [“Run-ons”](#) handouts.

Combining Independent and Dependent Clauses

Subordinate clauses are dependent clauses which begin with a subordinating conjunction. If the subordinate clause comes before your independent clause, use a comma at the end of the subordinate.

Example: Because I have a big day tomorrow, I have to get plenty of rest

Note: “Because I have a big day tomorrow” is a subordinate clause.

However, when joining a subordinate clause to the end of an independent clause, do not use a comma with the subordinating conjunction.

Example: I have to get plenty of rest because I have a big day tomorrow.

Note: “Because I have a big day tomorrow” is a subordinate clause.

Introductory Elements

When adding an introductory element to your sentence, use commas to help your readers distinguish the introduction from the rest of the sentence.

Introductory clauses are subordinate clauses, which means they begin with a subordinating conjunction, such as “if,” “since,” “when,” etc.

Clause: If I get up early enough, I will make it to your gym class.

Clause: Since she had already eaten, she did not order anything during lunch.

Note: For more information about subordinating conjunctions, please see our “Conjunctions” [handout](#).

When a sentence begins with an **introductory phrase** of three or more words, insert a comma after the phrase.

Phrase: After the party, she went home and fell asleep on her bed.

Phrase: The clear choice of the people, the candidate humbly accepted her nomination.

Note: For more information on phrases, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Some **introductory words** also require a comma. Usually, these words are conjunctive adverbs, like “additionally,” “however,” and “therefore.”

Word: However, we must not ignore other possibilities.

Word: Therefore, she should act now.

Items in a List

When joining three or more items in a list, use commas to distinguish the words, phrases, or clauses in the series. Be sure to use an Oxford comma before the conjunction.

Example: I need to purchase peaches, strawberries, tomatoes, and cucumbers at the farmers’ market.

Coordinate Adjectives

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives which describe the same noun. If the word “and” can be inserted



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between two adjectives, or if the order of the adjectives can be reversed, they need to be separated by a comma.

Example: Mrs. Elderberry is a **kind, generous** woman.

Note: You can tell that “kind” and “generous” are coordinate adjectives because you could very easily write that Mrs. Elderberry is a “kind and generous woman” or a “generous and kind woman.”

You do not need to use commas with cumulative adjectives—adjectives that build on each other to modify a noun. In other words, if the adjectives cannot be reordered, do not use commas.

Example: It is an **ancient Mayan** legend.

Note: You can tell that “ancient” and “Mayan” are cumulative adjectives because they build on each other. “Mayan” modifies “legend,” and “ancient” modifies the resulting phrase “Mayan legend.”

Indicating Supplemental Information

When used in pairs, commas indicate information that is non-essential or supplemental. Think of the commas as handles—you could use them to remove the clause from the sentence without affecting its basic meaning.

Adjective (Relative) Clauses

Adjective clauses (also known as relative clauses) act as adjectives, meaning that they provide additional information about nouns. These clauses usually begin with a relative pronoun (e.g., “who/whom,” “that,” or “which”).

There are two types of adjective clauses: restrictive and nonrestrictive. **Restrictive clauses** provide essential information about the nouns they modify and cannot be removed from the sentence without altering its meaning. **Non-restrictive clauses** do not restrict the nouns they modify—they add supplemental but nonessential information.

Do not use commas to set off restrictive adjective clauses.

Restrictive: The guests **who were seated** ate the pie.

Note: This sentence means that **only** the guests who were seated ate the pie. The sentence would not mean the same thing if the restrictive clause “who were seated” were removed.

Use a pair of commas to set off non-restrictive adjective clauses.

Non-restrictive: The guests, **who were seated**, ate the pie.

Note: This sentence means that **all** of the guests ate the pie and that they happened to be seated. The nonrestrictive clause could, in theory, be removed and the sentence still retain its meaning.

Note: For more information on adjective clauses, please see our “[Clauses](#)” and “[Pronouns](#)” handout.

Appositives

Apposition occurs when two nouns or noun phrases which refer to the same person, place, or thing are placed side-by-side. Within this appositive pair, the second noun essentially explains or expands the meaning of the first.

Example: This is **my friend Dale**.

Note: “My friend” and “Dale” are appositives.



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Like adjective clauses, apposition can be either **restrictive** or **non-restrictive**. Use commas for non-restrictive apposition. Do not use commas to set off restrictive apposition.

Restrictive: My brother Jon will meet you there.

Note: Since “Jon” restricts the phrase “my brother,” this sentence suggests that the speaker has multiple brothers and that Jon is the specified one who will be meeting the listener.

Non-restrictive: My brother, Jon, will meet you there.

Note: Since “Jon” could in theory be removed, this sentence suggests that the speaker has only one brother.

Direct Address

When addressing someone directly, set that person’s name in commas.

Example: Let’s eat, Grandma, before our dinner gets cold.

Signaling Contrast

Tag Questions

Sometimes statements end in brief questions. When this happens, use a comma to separate the two parts of the sentence.

Example: You’re not really going to punish me, are you?

Final Elements

Use a comma to highlight the contrast in short elements at the end of a sentence.

Example: The bike belongs to my brother, not you.

Introducing Quotations

Before Quotations

Use a comma to separate what is being said from who said it. If used before a quotation, the comma should go after the last word before the quote begins.

Example: He said, “I think it’s time for us to go.”

After Quotations

If used at the end of a quotation, the comma should go after the last word of the quote but before the end quotation marks.

Example: “I’m not sure I’m ready to leave.” she retorted.

Interrupting Quotations

If a full sentence in a quotation is interrupted, one comma should be placed after the last word in the first part of the quote, (i.e. inside the quotation marks) and another after the last word of the interrupting material.

Example: “I don’t care if you’re ready,” he hissed, “or if you don’t want to for whatever reason!”



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Other Quotation Mark Use

In all cases in which quotation marks are used but they are not setting off a direct quotation, the comma goes inside the quotes.

Example: The test groups were termed “heavy users,” “moderate users,” and “light users.”

My sister says she “surfs,” but she actually just boogie boards.

Note: For more information on how to use quotation marks, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Other Uses

Dates

Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year and after the year.

Example: Karen graduated on **June 5, 2003**, from the University of Maryland.

If any part of the date is omitted, leave out the comma.

Example: Karen graduated from the University of Maryland in **June 2003**.

Place Names

Use a comma to separate the city from the state and after the state in a document.

Example: I lived in **Baltimore, Maryland**, for 20 years.

If you use the two-letter capitalized form of a state in a document, you do not need a comma after the state.

Example: I lived in **Baltimore, MD** for 20 years.

Titles & Degrees

Use commas to surround degrees or titles used with names. Commas are no longer required around Jr. and Sr. Commas never set off I, II, III, etc.

Example: Silvia **Franklin, M.D.**, knew Sam Jones Jr. and Charles Pointer III.

Common Errors

Comma Splices

A comma alone is insufficient to join two independent clauses (i.e., simple sentences). When you join two sentences with only a comma, you create a comma splice.

Comma Splice: It’s terribly cold outside, I think I’ll leave my jacket at home.

Correct: It’s terribly cold outside, so I think I’ll leave my jacket at home.

Note: For more information on comma splices, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Unnecessary Commas with Compound Subjects

Unless you have a list of three or more subjects, there’s no need to separate with commas.



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Unnecessary Comma: Bill, and Tom went to the store.

Note: “Bill” and “Tom” are the subjects of the sentence. Since there are only two subjects, there is no need to separate them with a comma.

Unnecessary Comma: Walking the dog, and buying groceries are my least favorite activities.

Note: “Walking the dog” and “buying groceries” are gerund phrases acting as the subjects of the sentence. Since there are only two subjects, there is no need to separate them with a comma.

Necessary Comma: John, Paul, and George are my favorite Beatles

Note: “John,” “Paul,” and “George” are the subjects of the sentence. Since there are three subjects, commas are necessary.

Unnecessary Commas with Compound Predicates

The predicate is the part of the sentence that contains the verb and says something about the subject. Unless you have a list of **three or more** predicates, there’s no need to separate predicates with commas.

People often make this error by thinking they are combining two independent clauses. Remember that, when joining two independent clauses, each independent clause will have a separate subject and predicate.

Unnecessary Comma: She went to the post office, and mailed a letter.

Note: “Went to the post office” and “mailed a letter” are both predicates connected to the subject “she.” Since there are only two predicates, there is no need to separate them with a comma.

Unnecessary Comma: He runs on lakes and trails, and swims in rivers and lakes.

Note: “Runs on lakes and trails” and “swims in rivers and lakes” are both predicates connected to the subject “he.” Since there are only two predicates, there is no need to separate them with a comma.

Necessary Comma: They paint houses, repair fences, and dig ditches.

Note: “Paint houses,” “repair fences,” and “dig ditches” are all predicates attached to the subject “they.” Since there are three predicates, the commas are necessary.

Omitted Commas with Direct Address

Omitting commas when addressing someone directly can lead to unintentionally humorous sentences. In fact, remembering these humorous mistakes can help you avoid this problem.

Without Commas (Cannibalism): Let’s eat Grandma!

With Commas (Respect for the Elderly): Let’s eat, Grandma!

References

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