

Commas

Many people find rules for comma usage confusing because commas can perform many different functions in a sentence. However, if you familiarize yourself with the following common uses for commas, you will begin to use this versatile punctuation mark with greater ease and confidence.

Use commas in the following circumstances:

After an introductory word, phrase, or clause

Use a comma to separate an introductory word, phrase, or clause from the main clause of the sentence.

Comma setting off an introductory word:

Actually, Sam left the party early.

Comma setting off an introductory phrase:

In spite of his friends' objections, he went home to study.

Comma setting off an introductory dependent clause:

Before he left, he promised to come to their next gathering.

Before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses

An independent clause contains a subject and a verb and can be a sentence on its own. If you join one or more independent clauses into a single sentence, use a comma followed by a conjunction word to link them. Use the acronym FANBOYS to remember the coordinating conjunctions that can be used with a comma to connect independent clauses: For, And, Nor, Bt, Or, Yet, So

Comma + conjunction linking two independent clauses:

The tickets were mailed last week, so you should have received them by now.

Note that just because a FANBOY words appears in a sentence, that does not automatically mean that it will be preceded by a comma. The words in the FANBOYS acronym can be used to do things besides connect independent clauses.

FANBOY word linking two prepositional phrases:

The tickets are either in the mailbox or on your desk.

If two independent clauses are separated by a word other than a FANBOYS coordinating conjunction, use a semicolon instead of a comma:

Football is my favorite sport to watch; however, baseball is my favorite sport to play.

Between items in a list

Separate items in a list with commas. Place the word *and* or *or* before the final item.

My roommate sent me to the store to buy milk, apples, and peanut butter.

A good essay has a clear thesis statement, is structured logically, and contains adequate supporting details.

A note about the Oxford comma

The comma that precedes the final conjunction and list item is the subject of much debate among writers. Some people believe that this comma, referred to as the “Oxford comma,” is unnecessary because the conjunction already marks the separation between the final two items. However, without this comma, the meaning of certain sentences becomes unclear. Read the sentence that follows:

My heroes are my parents, Beyoncé and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

This sentence could either mean that A) you idolize your parents, Beyoncé, and Dwayne Johnson or B) you idolize your parents, who are Beyoncé and Dwayne Johnson. To avoid creating confusion, it is recommended that you always include the Oxford comma.

Between items in a list of non-cumulative adjectives that describe the same noun

If two or more adjectives are not joined by a conjunction and they describe the same noun, place a comma between them:

The witty, personable professor made the difficult class more enjoyable.

You should be able to place *and* between the adjectives or switch the order without changing the meaning:

“The personable, witty professor. . .” or “The witty and personable professor. . .”

If adjectives build on each other and would not make sense written in a different order, no comma is needed:

The massive black limousine turned slowly onto our street.

Her award-winning cherry pie was the final course of the impressive meal.

You wouldn't say "The massive and black limousine" or "Her award-winning and cherry pie," so no commas should be placed between these adjectives.

To set off non-essential information inserted into a sentence

Set off non-essential details about a noun or noun phrase with commas.

My literature book, which weighs about fifty pounds, contains some fascinating stories.

Howard Smith, a research scientist for a large pharmaceutical company, claims that vaccines are perfectly safe.

To determine if commas are needed, try removing the details from the sentence. If the sentence still makes sense without these details, meaning they are non-essential, commas are needed.

Between an attribution and a quotation

Place a comma after a phrase that introduces and provides attribution for a quote.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius states, "To thine own self be true."

If the wording introducing the quotation is a complete sentence, place a colon before the quotation:

Contemporary Americans have taken at least one Shakespearean adage to heart: "To thine own self be true."

Within dates, locations, and personal titles

When writing a date, place a comma between the day and year. If the sentence continues after the date, also place a comma after the year.

The engaged couple chose June 11, 2016, as their wedding date.

Similarly, use a comma before and after the state when giving a location.

My favorite vacation spot is Santa Fe, New Mexico, which offers activities for the whole family.

Also place a comma before and after someone's personal title:

John Williams, MD, joined the board of directors. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., believed in non-violent protest.