

How to Correctly Use Commas

Commas: An Introduction

Aside from the period, the comma is the most frequently used punctuation mark in the English language. However, unlike a period, a comma can be used in multiple different contexts. The fact that commas are required in so many different grammatical situations makes them one of the most difficult forms of punctuation to master.

At its most basic, a comma is used so the reader can best understand the text that is written. Commas show division within the sentence and add clarity. Most often, commas show readers how the words or phrases contained in a 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 and what information is simply extra.

Commas: Common Misconceptions

1. **You should add a comma whenever you pause while reading:** While commas can often indicate a pause in a sentence, where you pause in a sentence does not reliably indicate where a comma belongs. Different readers pause in different places.
2. **Long sentences need a comma:** A really long sentence may be perfectly correct without commas. The length of a sentence does not determine whether you need a comma.
3. **You connect complete sentences together with a comma:** In fact, this creates a grammatical error called a comma splice. A comma alone cannot connect two complete sentences together.

Comma Usage Part 1: Combining Sentence Elements

Commas can function as a bridge to connect different elements in a sentence together. This section introduces some of the ways commas perform this function.

1. **Combining Independent Clauses:** Commas frequently combine two independent clauses together. Independent clauses are complete sentences or portions of a sentence that can stand on their own as complete sentences. However, a comma cannot connect two independent clauses together on its own. A coordinating conjunction is required following the comma. Remember, there are seven coordinating conjunctions in English: (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
 - a. *I went to the store, and I bought some chips and beer.*

- b. Cardi B is performing in Raleigh, but the concert is already sold-out.
2. **Combining Dependent and Independent Clauses:** Commas are also used to combine a dependent clause and an independent clause. Unlike an independent clause, a dependent clause is not a complete sentence and cannot stand on its own as one. Dependent clauses generally begin with something called a subordinating conjunction. A subordinating conjunction is simply a word or phrase that introduces a dependent clause. There are many subordinating conjunctions in English: (because, if, before, when, since, after, etc.).

If the dependent clause comes **before** the independent clause, use a comma at the end of the dependent clause.

- a. After I graduated high school, I enrolled at Shaw University.
b. If you are a sneakerhead, you must own a pair of Jordans.

If the dependent clause comes **after** the independent clause, you do not use a comma.

- a. I enrolled at Shaw University after I graduated high school.
b. You must own a pair of Jordans if you are a sneakerhead.

3. **Combining Introductory Elements:** Writers often introduce a sentence with something called an introductory element that provides some additional information or clarification to a sentence. Introductory elements include introductory dependent clauses, introductory phrases, and introductory words. An introductory element always has a comma at the end separating it from the complete sentence that follows.

Introductory dependent clauses are dependent clauses (a subordinating conjunction + independent clause) that introduce a sentence.

- a. When my brother got married, I was the best man at his wedding.
b. Before I was born, my parents already had four children.

Introductory phrases are phrases of three or more words that introduce a sentence but are not dependent clauses or complete sentences.

- a. After the party, I drove straight back to my apartment.
b. The greatest boxer of all time, Muhammad Ali's record is 56-5-0.

Introductory words are single words (or sometimes a pair of words) that introduce a sentence.

- a. Overall, my experience in Alpha Kappa Alpha has been amazing.
b. In retrospect, I should have tried out for the football team as a freshman.

4. **Items in a List:** When you want to list three or more items in a sentence, commas indicate those items are connected in the form of a list. They also function to separate each item from the others in the list to avoid confusion when reading. Remember that items in a list do not just include nouns. List can also be made up of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even phrases. Finally, American English generally requires the use of something called the Oxford comma, which is what the comma between the second to last and last item in the list is called.

A list of nouns, verbs, adverbs, and phrases always requires commas to separate each item in the list.

- a. *I ordered pizzas, wings, breadsticks, and sodas from Dominos.*
- b. *I am in a triathlon, so I will have to run, swim, and bike if I want to win the race.*
- c. *Remember, you must answer the questions quickly, completely, and thoroughly.*
- d. *The bus hit the guardrail, flipped on its side, skidded across the highway, and came to a rest in the median.*

However, a list of adjectives does not always require commas. If you have a list of two or more adjectives that modify a noun, you do use commas. These adjectives are called coordinate adjectives. If one or more adjectives is modifying another adjective, you do not use commas. These are called cumulative adjectives. One way to tell the difference between coordinate and cumulative adjectives is to place the word “and” between each adjective in your list. If the list makes sense and sounds correct with the word “and,” you have coordinate adjectives. If the list does not make sense and sounds incorrect, you have cumulative adjectives.

- a. *My boyfriend is handsome, athletic, intelligent, and rich.*
(In this example, the list of adjectives modifies the noun “boyfriend,” and therefore, each adjective must be separated by a comma.)
- b. *The thick, fluffy pancakes were covered in sweet, golden syrup.*
(In this example, there are two lists of adjectives. The first two modify the noun “pancakes,” and the second two modify the noun “syrup.” Unlike other lists that only require commas when there are three or more items, even two coordinate adjectives together require a comma.)
- c. *My girlfriend is wearing a light aqua blue skirt.*
(In this example, the adjectives “light” and “aqua” modify the adjective “blue.” As a result, commas are not necessary here.)

Comma Usage Part 2: Including Supplemental Information

Commas are also used to include additional and supplemental information in a sentence. This information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence but offers readers extra, helpful information. The number of commas used will depend on where the supplemental information is included in the sentence.

1. **Interrupters:** Sometimes we include supplemental information in the middle of a sentence. These instances are called interrupters because that supplemental information “interrupts” the sentence. When you include an interrupter in a sentence, you must have a comma before the interrupter begins and a comma after the interrupter ends. Remember that an interrupter must not change or alter the meaning of the sentence. Rather, it simply provides additional information without changing the meaning.
 - a. *The color maroon, which I love, is one of the primary colors of Shaw University.*
 - b. *I have a new car, unlike my sister, that I drive every day.*

2. **End-of-Sentence:** In other instances, we include supplemental information at the end of a sentence. Unlike an interrupter, this information does not “interrupt” the sentence. Rather, it is tacked on to the end of a sentence. Therefore, you only need to include a comma at the beginning of the supplemental information since it will end with a period.
 - a. *The color maroon is one of the primary colors of Shaw University, which I love.*
 - b. *I have a new car that I drive every day, unlike my sister.*

Comma Usage Part 3: Introducing Quotations

Commas play an important role when you are incorporating direct quotation into your writing. When you include a direct quote, it is important to introduce the author of the quote, the person who said the quote, or the way in which the quote was said. Similar to the inclusion of supplemental information, the placement of the introduction of the quote will determine the placement of your commas.

1. **Before a Quotation:** If you add an introduction before the quotation, the comma should go after the last word before the quote begins.
 - a. *Michelle Obama said, “When they go low, we go high.”*
 - b. *My little cousin screamed, “Mom! I want to get an ice cream!”*
2. **Interrupting a Quotation:** If your introduction interrupts the quote, one comma should be placed after the last word in the first part of the quote (inside the quotation marks) and another after the last word of the interrupting introduction (outside the quotation marks).
 - a. *“Sometimes,” Beyoncé sang, “I go off. I go hard. Get what’s mine. I’m a star.”*
 - b. *“The only thing we have to fear,” Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “is fear itself.”*
3. **After a Quotation:** If your introduction is at the end of a quotation, the comma should go after the last word of the quote but before the end quotation marks.
 - a. *“We want freedom by any means necessary,” Malcom X wrote.*
 - b. *“Pro Christo et Humanitate,” reads Shaw University’s motto.*

Commas: To Wrap Up

This handout is not an exhaustive list of all the various ways that commas can be used when writing. However, the vast majority of instances you will need to use commas in your own writing have been covered here. While the comma is the most complicated form of punctuation to master in the English language, by focusing on (1) combining sentence elements, (2) including supplemental information, and (3) introducing quotations, you will be well on your way to becoming proficient in comma usage!