

Comma Use

This handout provides helpful tips so that you can master comma use. Commas help readers figure out which parts of the sentence go together, and which parts are most important. Many students struggle with using commas correctly and may feel like commas are mysterious. You can feel more confident about using commas if you follow a few guidelines.

Myths about Commas

Before we learn the guidelines for correct comma use, let's look at some common myths that people may believe about commas.

Myth #1: Long sentences need a comma. This is not always the case. Some long sentences are perfectly correct without any commas.

Myth #2: You should use a comma wherever you pause. Where you pause or breath while reading a sentence does not indicate where a comma is needed. Different readers will pause or breath in different places. It is better to rely on the rules for comma use rather than where you pause.

Myth #3: Commas seem mysterious, and the rules are complicated. In fact, most of the time, comma placement is pretty predictable. If you learn where most commas need to be by using the tips in this handout.

1. Introductory parts (small, medium, large)

Setting off introductory words, phrases or clauses with a comma lets the reader know that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. Introductory parts can be divided into three sizes: small, medium and large. No matter what size it is, an introductory part cannot stand alone as a complete thought (sentence).

There are small (just one word) introductory parts:

Typically, we leave our house one hour before the church service begins.

However, I often forget to lock the door and need to go back to lock it.

There are medium introductory parts which are phrases about two to four words in length. They may be prepositional phrases, -ing phrases, or some type of clause.

By the way, could you tell me the way to St. Louis?

Before the musicians arrived, the crowd was getting restless.

After the game, we all went to the local ice cream shop.

There are large introductory parts which are more than four words long. It is possible that these longer introductory parts will be longer than the main sentence.

If you don't hear from me, you can assume I'm not going to the movie.

When the lightning struck, the dog yelped.

Because of the long line at the restaurant, we decided to eat at home.

2. FANBOYS

FANBOYS is an easy way to remember the seven coordinating conjunctions: For, And, Nor, Boys, Or, Yet, So. These words are used to connect words, phrases and sentences.

Connecting words: I am tired and hungry this afternoon.

Connecting phrases: My socks are in the drawer and under my bed.

Connecting sentences: Jim enjoys his job, but he has a long drive to get there every day.

Notice in the last example that a comma was used before the conjunction but. When the FANBOYS are used to connect two complete sentences, a comma should be placed in front of the conjunction.

Mary reads a lot of fiction novels, but she never watches movies that are based on such books.

Ben swims every day for exercise, so he stays in good physical condition.

3. Items in a list

Put commas between a list or series of three or more items. These items may be words, phrases, or clauses.

Books, pens, and papers must be brought to class every day.

Ramon enjoys reading popular novels, eating Italian food, and taking naps.

We left the amusement park early because the weather was hot, the park became crowded, and we had no more money.

You may notice in some pieces of writing that the final comma before the conjunction is left out. This final comma is sometimes considered optional if leaving it out does not cause problems with clarity. Using the final comma before the conjunction is never wrong, however. If you are not sure if you can leave it out, it is safer to use it.

People brought aid to the elderly, the homeless, and the sick after the disaster.

4. Interrupting material

Two commas should be used to surround extra information that appears within the sentence but is not part of the main subject and verb of the sentence. These interrupters are sometimes called “parenthetical expressions” or an “aside”. They interrupt the main sentence and add extra description or definition.

Luiz, a sophomore from Chicago, was the only Illinois resident at the music festival in Florida.

Abraham Lincoln, for example, is one of the Presidents of the United States who was assassinated.

My sister, a student at Ohio State University, is visiting me for the summer.

Alaska, which is known for being cold, does have a summer season.

Notice some interrupters that start with the words who, which, or that do not need commas surrounding them. If the information in the interrupter is necessary for the sentence, then do not put commas around the phrase or clause. To decide if the information is necessary, remove the interrupter from the sentence and see if the meaning of the sentence changes.

All students *who study hard* will pass the test.

Dogs *that have their vaccinations* will be allowed to participate in the dog show.

In the sentences above, notice that if we remove the interrupters, then the meanings of the sentences change, and they no longer express the same thought. Therefore, we would not put commas around those interrupters.

5. Direct Quotations

In some of your writing assignments, you will need to use quotations. You may be using dialogue in an essay, or you may be incorporating information from a source you researched. When you use a direct quote, you should set off the quoted material with a comma or commas.

Tom said, “The house that I like is for sale.”

“The house that I like,” said Tom, “is for sale.”

According to the American Cancer Society, “One in three people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime” (Cancer.org).

Congratulations! You know how to use commas!

These guidelines cover the most common situations in writing, but you may have other questions. If you are worried about punctuation, there are many resources to get answers. You might consult a writing handbook from your library, find some writing tips online, or visit the Writing Center.

Works consulted for this handout:

Anker, Susan and Miriam Moore. *Real Writings with Readings*. 6th ed, Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

“Commas.” *The Writing Center*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021.
<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/commas>.