

COMMAS

The rules for comma usage, luckily, have few exceptions. However, using commas can feel like guesswork if you don't have a basic understanding of sentence structure. The first part of this handout will review some parts of speech and types of clauses. Next, we will be able to apply rules for commas to different kinds of sentences. Lastly, we will list common usages for commas that address specific situations, for example making a list or writing the date. Please feel free to skip ahead accordingly.

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Part I: Some Parts of Speech and Types of Clauses

Complete sentences, also known as *independent clauses* require, minimally, a **subject** and a **verb**.

Subjects: The subject of a sentence is, in most cases, a noun. It may also be a gerund, or a group of words (including a verb) that stands for an idea or subject. For example: **That he waited until the last minute** was evident in the poor quality of his speech.

Nouns: A noun answers the question *who?* or *what?* It can be a specific person, place, thing, or idea. Pronouns (he, she, it, etc.) refer generally to a person, place, thing, or idea and take the place of a specific noun.

Gerunds: A gerund is a verb that acts like a noun. For example: **Reading** is my favorite hobby. Adding *-ing* to the verb allows you to use it as a noun, meaning the subject, topic, process, or state of the particular ‘action.’

Verbs: A verb indicates an action or state of being of the noun—what is the person, place or thing *doing*? Verbs can be singular or plural, as well as a form of past, present, or future tense.

Part II: Applying Comma Rules to Various Sentence Types

Comma Usage in Compound Sentences

Now that you know what an independent clause is, you will be able to identify a **compound sentence**. Two or more independent clauses form a compound sentence. A coordinating conjunction, preceded by a comma, links independent clauses. The coordinating conjunctions are: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. You can remember these words by the acronym FANBOYS.

Example:

My friend lives in Manhattan, so I will take the train to visit him next week.

Independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause.

If you forget the comma or the coordinating conjunction, you will make errors such as run-on-sentences. A **run-on-sentence** doesn't simply mean that the sentence is too long or wordy; often it means that you need commas and coordinating conjunctions to clearly organize a series of complete thoughts in one sentence.

If you determine the subject and verb as well as whether each clause is dependent or independent, then there is no guesswork when using commas.

Examples:

Tom and Josh went to the game, but Jeff stayed home.

S + V , *but* S + V .
Independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause.

Reading is her favorite hobby, so I always buy her a book for her birthday.

S (gerund) + V (to be) , *so* S + V .
Independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause.

The idea that women don't deserve the same wages as men is seriously outdated, and

S + V , *and* V + comma + coordinating conjunction
Independent clause +

it's a shame some people still feel this way.

S+V .
+ independent clause.

Comma Usage in Complex Sentences

A dependent clause and an independent clause form a complex sentence. Dependent clauses can be tricky because they often contain noun and verb combinations that look ‘complete.’ Consider the following sentence:

Example:

If at first you don’t succeed, you should try again.

If (subordinating conjunction), S + V .

Dependent clause + comma + independent clause.

However, when a subordinating conjunction comes before these nouns and verbs, the clause becomes dependent; it depends on the rest of the sentence to make sense. The following is a list of common subordinating conjunctions:

After	Although	As	As if	As soon as
As though	Because	Before	Even if	Even though
How	If	In order that	Once	Rather than
Since	So that	Than	That	Though
Unless	Until	When	Whenever	Where
Whereas	Wherever	While	Whether	During

In a complex sentence, a comma is required after an introductory dependent clause and before the independent clause.

Example:

Even if it is overcast, it is important to wear sunblock.

Even if , S+V .

Dependent clause + comma + independent clause.

When the independent clause comes first and the dependent clause is second, you will usually need a comma to clarify the organization of your ideas, but the comma is not required.

Example:

Some people will have to stand on the bus, since the trip is overbooked.

S + V , *since* .

Independent clause + comma + dependent clause.

Comma Usage in Compound-Complex Sentences

When you have a sentence with at least one dependent clause and at least two independent clauses, it is compound-complex. The rules for commas apply just as they would for a compound sentence or a complex sentence, except they are used in the same sentence.

Examples:

Although I'm not a sports fan, I really enjoyed the game, so I ordered tickets for next week too.

S + V S + V

Dependent clause + comma + independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause.

It is helpful to read your paper out loud to yourself, or you can read it to a friend, because you will catch mistakes you might not otherwise notice.

Independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause + comma + dependent clause.

Part III: Additional Uses of the Comma

Commas Between Items in a Series

When you list more than two things (nouns) or actions (verbs) in a row, a comma should separate each item or phrase.

Examples:

Tomatoes, corn, and zucchini are all in season right now.

If you go to Philadelphia, make sure you see the Liberty Bell, tour Independence Hall, and ride through Old City in a horse-drawn carriage.

Shuba loves cooking, playing piano, and working in the garden.

Note: The above sentences are also good examples of parallel phrasing. When you write a list or series, all the items should be in the same form. For example, the first sentence lists nouns, the second lists verbs in the present tense, and the last lists gerunds (verb + ing).

A Comma Between Two Adjectives

A comma goes between two descriptive words used before a noun when it would make sense to say ‘and’ between them. For example: ‘a ripe, juicy pear’ makes sense as ‘a ripe *and* juicy pear,’ but ‘the five shy kittens’ doesn’t make sense as ‘the five *and* shy kittens.’ Another way to test whether or not you need a comma in between two adjectives is if they can be interchanged and still retain their original meaning. In other words, ‘a juicy, ripe pear’ is clear and does not change the meaning. These adjectives are called *coordinate adjectives*. However, the adjectives ‘five’ and ‘shy’ cannot be interchanged because the meaning of the phrase would be unclear. So, a comma *does not* separate these adjectives, which are known as *cumulative adjectives*.

Examples:

There is nothing better than a long, hot shower after a day of shoveling snow.

These adjectives can be interchanged, so a comma is needed: ‘a hot, long shower.’

No one can resist Aunt Zelda’s decadent, creamy desserts.

These adjectives can also be interchanged, so a comma is needed here, too: ‘creamy, decadent deserts.’

Sameer is a busy graduate student.

These adjectives cannot be interchanged, so no comma is used. This is an example of using cumulative adjectives.

A Comma with Nonessential Elements

Use commas to set off additional or nonessential information (called a nonessential appositive or a nonessential element).

Example of a Nonessential Element:

My sister, who is an advertising executive, works long hours to support her family.

The adjective clause “who is an advertising executive” gives additional information about my sister. And, if the clause “who is an advertising executive” is removed, the sentence can still stand alone. That is, the sentence’s meaning is still clear: My sister works long hours to support her family.

Example of an Essential Element:

Any advertising executive who works ninety hours per week will likely burn out from stress.

This sentence’s meaning depends on the clause “who works ninety hours per week” for its meaning to be clear. Without this clause, the sentence’s meaning changes: Any advertising executive will burn out from stress. Therefore, the clause is essential to the sentence’s meaning, and no commas are needed.

A Comma with Direct Quotations

If you are writing the exact words that a person speaks or that are written in a text, this is a ‘direct’ quotation. You will use quotation marks to show where the person or character begins and ends speaking. A comma goes either before or after the quote to set it off from the rest of the sentence.

If the comma comes after the quotation, it will be inside the quotation marks.

Example:

“We just want you to be happy,” Jim’s parents said.

If the comma comes before the quotation, it will be outside the quotation marks.

Example:

He replied, “Does this mean I can get a tattoo?”

Notice that the comma follows the attribution, ‘He replied,’ also known as a dialogue tag or signal phrase.

If you place your attribution (for example ‘he said’), in the middle of the sentence, a comma will go both before *and* after.

Example:

“If Jen’s name is tattooed on your arm,” I asked him, “what will you do if you break up?”

Exception:

Jim firmly believes that “couples who date for more than three years won’t break up.”

In the above example, because the word ‘that’ is used, no comma is needed. The quote is incorporated into the sentence itself.

Note: There are specific rules for quotations that include an exclamation point or a question mark. Consult a grammar or writing handbook to ensure that you have properly formatted quotations.

A Comma with a Transitional Word or Phrase

Use a comma to set off transitional words or phrases, whether they occur in the beginning or middle of a sentence.

Examples:

I have read several novels by Julia Alvarez, for instance, *In the Time of the Butterflies*.
Notice the use of two commas here to separate the transitional phrase—‘for instance.’

For instance, I enjoy novels by Julia Alvarez.

Therefore, the politician won the election.

A comma is also used to set off a transitional phrase that follows a semi-colon.

Example:

Anthony likes to go out for Chinese food; however, his girlfriend is allergic to it.

Notice that this particular sentence structure follows a pattern:

Independent clause + semi-colon + transition word + comma + independent clause.

To use this sentence construction, the two independent clauses must be closely related in meaning.

Conventional Uses of Commas

There are a number of situations in which commas are used to organize information. For example, dates and addresses require commas. Use commas when writing the date or address by itself and also when writing a date or address in a sentence.

Here are some examples of everyday uses of commas:

Dates

January 31, 1976 *[Note the comma between the day and the year.]*

Tickets are sold out for the premiere on July 10, 2007 and also for the gala on August 19, 2007.

Addresses

Bucks County Community College

275 Swamp Road

Newtown, PA 18940 *[Note the comma between the city and state.]*

The conference will be held at Bucks County Community College, 275 Swamp Road, Newtown, PA 18940.

Beginning and Ending a Letter

Letters open with a ‘salutation.’ This greeting lets the reader know to whom we are speaking.

Examples:

Dear Isabel,

When you don’t know the person well, or for a more formal letter such as a cover letter, you can use a colon instead.

Examples:

To Whom It May Concern:

Dear Sir or Madam:

Dear Mr. Lomax:

You will also use a comma at the end of a letter before signing your name.

Examples:

Sincerely,

Truly yours,

Best wishes,

Numbers

Commas separate hundreds, thousands, millions and so on when we write numerals. A comma goes between every three digits from right to left. For example:

Approximately 10,350 students are enrolled at Bucks County Community College.

My neighbor won \$250,000 dollars by playing the lottery.

Somehow, the governor balances the state’s \$1,500,000 budget.

Practice: Add commas to the sentences below.

1. As soon as I save enough money I intend to buy a car.
2. New Jersey which borders Pennsylvania on the east is famous for swamps and tomatoes.
3. It was only eleven o'clock and the temperature had already reached ninety degrees.
4. "Drop the gun" the police shouted "and put your hands in the air!"
5. They invited Sylvia to the picnic but she had another obligation.
6. Although Mike Schmidt hit two home runs the Phillies lost.
7. She hopes to travel to India Tibet Nepal and South Africa.
8. Mom always says "You are what you eat."
9. "One more slice of pie won't hurt you" says Grandma.
10. My older sister who was allergic to dogs as a child raises Siberian huskies.
11. I had a dead car battery and only two dollars so I decided to hitchhike back.
12. Theodore Roosevelt became President when he was forty-two.
13. Playing tennis swimming and yoga are activities that use all the muscle groups.
14. Karen knew that she had to study diligently for her literature exam or she wouldn't pass.
15. The students opened their crisp new notebooks.
16. The band stopped playing after the roof began to leak.
17. My car ran beautifully all the way to Buffalo where it suddenly stalled.
18. On July 24 2007 anyone who returns overdue library books will not have to pay fines.
19. Roger moved to 54 Hallowell Drive Philadelphia PA 19115.
20. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Answers and Explanations

1. As soon as I save enough money, I intend to buy a car.

$$\text{S} + \text{V}$$
 Dependent clause + comma + independent clause.
2. New Jersey, which borders Pennsylvania on the east, is famous for swamps and tomatoes.

$$\text{S} \quad \text{comma} + \text{non-essential phrase} + \text{comma} \quad \text{V}$$
3. It was only eleven o'clock, and the temperature had reached ninety degrees.

$$\text{S} + \text{V} \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{S} + \qquad \qquad \text{V}$$
 Independent clause + comma + coordinating + independent clause.

$$\text{conjunction}$$
4. "Drop the gun," the police shouted, "and put your hands in the air!"
 Direct quote + comma *inside* + attribution + comma *outside* + direct quote.
5. They invited Sylvia to the picnic, but she had another obligation.

$$\text{S} + \text{V} \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{S} + \text{V}$$
 Independent clause + comma + coordinating + independent clause.

$$\text{conjunction}$$
6. Although Mike Schmidt hit two home runs, the Phillies lost.

$$\text{S} + \text{V}$$
 Dependent clause + comma + independent clause.
7. She hopes to travel to India, Tibet, Nepal, and South Africa.

$$\text{Items in a series}$$
8. Mom always says, "You are what you eat."
 Attribution + comma *outside* + direct quote.
9. "One more slice of pie won't hurt you," says Grandma.
 Direct quote + comma *inside* + attribution.
10. My older sister, who was allergic to dogs as a child, raises Siberian huskies.

$$\text{S} \quad \text{comma} + \text{non-essential information} + \text{comma} \quad \text{V}.$$
11. I had a dead car battery and only two dollars, so I decided to hitchhike back.

$$\text{S} + \text{V} \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{S} + \text{V}$$
 Independent clause + comma + coordinating + independent clause.

$$\text{conjunction}$$
12. Theodore Roosevelt became President when he was forty-two.

$$\text{S} + \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{V}$$
 Independent clause + *no* comma + dependent clause.

13. Playing tennis, swimming, and yoga are activities that use all the muscle groups.

Items in a series

14. Karen knew that she had to study diligently for her literature exam, or she wouldn't pass.

S + V

S + V

Independent clause +

comma + coordinating + independent clause.
conjunction

15. The students opened their crisp, new notebooks.

Two adjectives that can be interchanged

16. The band stopped playing after the roof began to leak.

Independent clause + *no* comma + dependent clause.

17. My car ran beautifully all the way to Buffalo, where it suddenly stalled.

Independent clause +

comma + dependent clause.

18. On July 24, 2007 anyone who returns overdue library books will not have to pay fines.

Comma between day and year

19. Roger moved to 54 Hallowell Drive, Philadelphia, PA 19115.

Comma between street and city as well as comma between city and state

20. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

S + appositive +

V

No comma needed because information is essential to sentence's meaning