

# Commas (Eight Basic Uses)

To better understand the use of the comma, begin by learning the following eight basic uses:

## 1. USE A COMMA TO SEPARATE INDEPENDENT CLAUSES.

Rule: Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, yet, so, or nor, for*) when it joins two complete ideas (independent clauses).

1. He walked down the street, and then he turned the corner.
2. You can go shopping with me, or you can go to a movie alone.

## 2. USE A COMMA AFTER AN INTRODUCTORY CLAUSE OR PHRASE.

Rule: Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase. A comma tells readers that the introductory clause or phrase has come to a close and that the main part of the sentence is about to begin.

1. When Evan was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.
2. Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, park rangers discovered a gold mine.

## 3. USE A COMMA BETWEEN ALL ITEMS IN A SERIES.

Rule: Use a comma to separate each item in a series; a series is a group of three or more items having the same function and form in a sentence.

1. We bought apples, peaches, and bananas today. (**series of words**)
2. Mary promised that she would be a good girl, that she would not bite her brother, and that she would not climb onto the television. (**series of clauses**)
3. The instructor looked through his briefcase, through his desk, and around the office for the lost grade book. (**series of phrases**)

## 4. USE COMMAS TO SET OFF NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES.

Rule: Use commas to enclose clauses not essential to the meaning of a sentence. These nonessential clauses are called nonrestrictive. Clauses which are essential are called restrictive. Both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses may begin with a relative pronoun (such as *who, whom, whose, that, which*). A relative pronoun refers to the noun or pronoun that precedes it.

1. Steven Strom, whose show you like, will host a party next week. (**nonrestrictive**)
2. John, who spent the last three days fishing, is back on the job again. (**nonrestrictive**)
3. The gentleman who is standing by the fireplace is a well-known composer. (**restrictive**)

## 5. USE A COMMA TO SET OFF APPOSITIVES.

Rule: An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun. Appositives offer nonessential information. Nonrestrictive appositives are set off with commas; restrictive appositives are not.

1. Alexander Pope, the Restoration poet, is famous for his monologues. (**appositive**)
2. The poet Pope is famous for his monologues. (**no appositive**)
3. The New York Jets, the underdogs, surprised everyone by winning the Super Bowl. (**appositive**)

#### **6. USE A COMMA TO INDICATE DIRECT ADDRESS.**

Rule: When a speaker in a sentence names the person to whom he is speaking, this addressing of his audience is called direct address. Direct address is indicated by the use of a comma or commas, depending upon its placement within the sentence.

1. I think, John, you're wrong.
2. John, I think you're wrong.
3. I think you're wrong, John.

#### **7. USE COMMAS TO SET OFF DIRECT QUOTATIONS.**

Rule: A dialogue is a conversation between two or more people. If the speaker (not the listener) in the conversation is identified, his name, (or the noun or pronoun used to refer to the speaker), and the verb that refers to his speaking are enclosed within commas.

1. Mary said, "I dislike concerts because the music is too loud."
2. "I dislike concerts because the music is too loud," she said.
3. "I dislike concerts," proclaimed Mary, "because the music is too loud."

#### **8. USE COMMAS WITH DATES, ADDRESSES, TITLES, AND NUMBERS.**

Rules for dates: In dates, the year is set off from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.

Ex: On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.

Rules for addresses: The elements of an address or place name are separated by commas. A zip code, however, is not preceded by a comma.

Ex: John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.

Ex: Please send the letter to Greg Carvin at 708 Spring Street, Washington, IL 61571.

Rules for titles: If a title follows a name, separate the title from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.

Ex: Sandra Belinsky, MD, has been appointed to the board.

Rules for numbers: In numbers more than four digits long, use commas to separate the numbers into groups of three, starting from the right. In numbers four digits long, a comma is optional.

Ex: 3,500 [or 3500]

Ex: 100,000

Ex: 6,000,000

## 10 Rules for Using Commas

1. Use commas to **separate independent clauses** when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: **FANBOYS**: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*.

- The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.
- The student explained her question, yet the instructor still didn't seem to understand.
- Yesterday was her brother's birthday, so she took him out to dinner.

2. Use commas **after introductory** a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come **before the main clause**.

a. Common starter words for introductory dependent clauses that should be followed by a comma:

**after, although, as, while, when, until, before, because, if, since**. **AAAWWUBBIS words**

- While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.
- Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.
- If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.
- When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

However, don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent clause follows it.

**INCORRECT:** The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.

**CORRECT:** The cat scratched at the door while I was eating.

b. Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).

- Having finished the test, he left the room.
- To get a seat, you'd better come early.
- After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.
- The sun radiating intense heat, we sought shelter in the cafe.

c. Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include *yes, however, well*.

- Well, perhaps he meant no harm.
- Yes, the package should arrive tomorrow morning.
- However, you may not be satisfied with the results.

3. Use a pair of commas in the **middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not ESSENTIAL to the meaning of the sentence**. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

Here are some clues to help you decide whether the sentence element is essential:

- If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense?
- Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?

If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, then the element in question is **NONESSENTIAL** and should be **set off with commas**. Here are some example sentences with nonessential elements:

- **Clause:** That Tuesday, *which happens to be my birthday*, is the only day when I am available to meet.
- **Phrase:** This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, *on the other hand*, is rather bland.
- **Word:** I appreciate your hard work. In this case, *however*, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.

4. Do not use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with *that* (relative clauses). **That clauses after nouns are always essential**. *That* clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential.

**That clauses after nouns:**

- The book *that I borrowed from you* is excellent.
- The apples *that fell out of the basket* are bruised.

**That clauses following a verb expressing mental action:**

- She believes *that she will be able to earn an A*.
- He is dreaming *that he can fly*.
- I contend *that it was wrong to mislead her*.
- They wished *that warm weather would finally arrive*.

Examples of other ESSENTIAL elements (no commas):

Students *who cheat* only harm themselves.  
The baby *wearing a yellow jumpsuit* is my niece.  
The candidate *who had the least money* lost the election.

Examples of NONESSENTIAL elements (set off by commas):

- Fred, *who often cheats*, is just harming himself.
- My niece, *wearing a yellow jumpsuit*, is playing in the living room.
- The Green party candidate, *who had the least money*, lost the election.
- Apples, *which are my favorite fruit*, are the main ingredient in this recipe.
- Professor Benson, *grinning from ear to ear*, announced that the exam would be tomorrow.
- Tom, *the captain of the team*, was injured in the game.
- It is up to you, *Jane*, to finish.
- She was, *however*, too tired to make the trip.
- Two hundred dollars, *I think*, is sufficient.

5. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

- The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.
- The candidate promised to lower taxes, protect the environment, reduce crime, and end unemployment.
- The prosecutor argued that the defendant, who was at the scene of the crime, who had a strong revenge motive, and who had access to the murder weapon, was guilty of homicide.

6. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives with equal ("co"-ordinate) status in describing the noun; neither adjective is subordinate to the other. You can decide if two adjectives in a row are coordinate by asking the following questions:

- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with and between them?

If you answer yes to these questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma. Here are some examples of coordinate and non-coordinate adjectives:

- He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)
- They lived in a white frame house. (non-coordinate)
- She often wore a gray wool shawl. (non-coordinate)
- Your cousin has an easy, happy smile. (coordinate)

7. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.

- He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
- The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human.
- You're one of the senator's close friends, aren't you?
- The speaker seemed innocent, even gullible.

8. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Such phrases are free modifiers that can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusion. (If the placement of the modifier causes confusion, then it is not "free" and must remain "bound" to the word it modifies.)

- Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously. (correct)  
INCORRECT: Lisa waved at Nancy, laughing joyously. (Who is laughing, Lisa or Nancy?)
- Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy. (correct)
- Lisa waved at Nancy, who was laughing joyously. (correct)

9. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

- Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.
- July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life. Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC?
- Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.

(When you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year:  
"The average temperatures for July 1988 are the highest on record for that month.")

10. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

- John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow."
- "I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment."
- In 1848, Marx wrote, "Workers of the world, unite!"