

THE COMMA

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.

Example: Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.

Caution: do not use a comma to separate coordinate word groups that are not independent clauses.

Example: A good money manager controls expenses (no comma) and invests surplus dollars to meet future needs.

Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase.

Examples:

- Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, we discovered an abandoned shelter.
- When Irwin was ready to eat, his cat jumped onto the table.
- Because my landlord would not turn on the heat, I refused to pay the rent.

Compare:

I refused to pay the rent because my landlord would not turn on the heat.

Use a comma between all items in a series.

Example: Uncle Bob willed me all of his property, houses, and warehouses.

Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not joined by “and.” Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives.

Examples:

- Melissa has become a strong, confident, independent woman.
- Three large gray shapes moved slowly toward us.

Use commas to set off nonrestrictive elements. Do not use commas to set off restrictive elements.

Restrictive

Examples:

- For camp the children needed clothes that were washable.
- One corner of the attic was filled with newspapers dating from the turn of the century.

Restrictive Appositive

Example: The song “Fire It Up” was blasted out of amplifiers ten feet tall.

Nonrestrictive

Examples:

- For camp the children needed sturdy shoes, which were expensive.
- Ed’s country house, which is located on thirteen acres, was completely furnished.
- The helicopter, with its 100,000-candlepower spotlight illuminating the area, circled above.

Nonrestrictive Appositive

Example: Norman Mailer’s first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was a best-seller.

Use commas to set off transitional and parenthetical expressions, absolute phrases, and elements expressing contrast.

Transitional expressions

Examples:

- Alex did not understand the assignment; moreover, he was confused about its due date.
- Natural foods are not always salt free; for example, celery and watercress contain more sodium than most people would imagine.

Exception:

If a transitional expression blends smoothly with the rest of the sentence, calling for little or no pause in reading, it does not need to be set off with a comma. Expressions such as also, at least, certainly, consequently, indeed, of course, moreover, no doubt, perhaps, then, and therefore do not always call for a pause.

Example: Bill’s typewriter is broken; therefore you will need to borrow Sue’s.

Parenthetical expressions

Examples:

- The bass weighed about twelve pounds, give or take a few ounces.
- Evolution, as far as we know, does not work this way.

Absolute phrases

Example: Her tennis game at last perfected, Chris won the cup.

Contrasted elements

Example: Jane talks to me as an adult and friend, not as her little sister.

Use commas to set off nouns or direct address, the words yes and no, interrogative tags, and mild interjections.

Examples:

- Forgive us, Dr. Spock, for reprimanding Jason.
- Yes, the loan will probably be approved.
- The film was faithful to the book, wasn't it?
- Well, cases like these are difficult to decide.

Use commas with expressions such as “he said” to set off direct quotations.

Examples:

- He remarked, “Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies.”
- “Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies,” wrote philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Use commas with dates, addresses, and titles.

Examples:

- On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.
- John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.
- Sandra Barnes, M.D., has been appointed to the board of directors.

Use a comma to prevent confusion.

Examples:

- To err is human; to forgive, divine.

- All of the catastrophes that we had feared might happen, happened.
- Patients who can, walk up and down the halls several times a day.

Unnecessary commas

Do not use a comma between compound elements that are not independent clauses.

Example: Jake does not realize that his illness is serious (no comma) and that he will have to alter his diet to recover.

Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.

Examples:

- Other causes of asthmatic attacks are (no comma) stress, change in temperature, humidity, and cold air.
- It was a senseless, dangerous (no comma) mission.

Do not use a comma after a coordinating conjunction (“and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” “for,” “so,” “yet”).

Example: Occasionally soap operas are taped, but (no comma) more often they are being performed as they are telecast.

Do not use a comma after “such as” or “like”.

Example: Many shade-loving plants, such as (no comma) begonias, impatiens, and coleus, can add color to a shady garden.

Do not use a comma before a parenthesis.

Example: At MCI Sylvia began at the bottom (no comma) (with only three and a half walls and a swivel chair), but within five years she had been promoted to supervisor.

Do not use a comma with a question mark or an exclamation point.

Example: “Why don’t you try it?” (no comma) she coaxed. “You can’t do any worse than the rest of us.”

Hacker, Diana. *The Bedford Handbook for Writers*. Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1991.