



Basic Rules for Using Commas

The comma is a useful punctuation device because it separates parts of sentences into meaningful chunks, making your writing easier for your readers to process (and therefore understand). The rules provided here are those found in traditional handbooks; however, in certain rhetorical contexts, these rules may be broken to create a particular effect.

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by coordinating conjunctions such as *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* (you can remember these by thinking of the first letter of each coordinating conjunction ~ **FANBOYS**)

- **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) Introductory Clauses: common introductory clauses followed by a comma include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, and while*.

- **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.

Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it except for cases of extreme contrast.

- She was still quite upset, **even though she had won the Oscar**. (extreme contrast)

b) Introductory Phrases: introductory phrases are followed by a comma.

- **Having finished the test**, he left the room. (participial phrase)
- **To get a seat**, you'd better come early. (infinitive phrase)
- **Her paws covered in dirt**, the cat jumped up onto the freshly washed sheets. (absolute phrase)
- **Over the river and through the woods**, to grandmother's house we go. (prepositional phrase with +4 words)

c) Introductory Words: introductory words before the main clause are followed by a comma

- **Well**, perhaps he meant no harm.
- **Yes**, the package should arrive tomorrow morning.

3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off **a)** clauses, **b)** phrases, and **c)** 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.

- That Tuesday, **which happens to be my birthday**, is when I am available to meet. (clause)
- This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, **on the other hand**, is bland. (phrase)
- I appreciate your hard work. In this case, **however**, you have over-exerted yourself. (word)



If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, the element in question is nonessential and should be set off with commas.

- 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?

4. 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.**

5. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Do not add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.

If you answer yes to the following questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma.

- 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?

Coordinate

- He was a **difficult, stubborn** child.
- The 1) **relentless**, 2) **powerful**, 3) **oppressive** sun beat down on them. (Both 1-2 and 2-3 are coordinate)

Coordinate and Non-Coordinate Combination

- The 1) **relentless**, 2) **powerful** 3) **summer** sun beat down on them. (1-2 are coordinate; 2-3 are non-coordinate)

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

- You're one of the senator's close friends, **aren't you?**
- The speaker seemed innocent, **even gullible.**

7. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

- To **George, Harrison** had been a sort of idol.

8. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Such phrases can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusion, but if the placement causes confusion, the phrase must remain "bound" to the word it modifies.

- Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, **laughing joyously.**



- **Laughing joyously**, Lisa waved at Nancy.

9. Use commas to set off all geographical names, dates, addresses, and titles in names.

- **Birmingham, Alabama**, gets its name from **Birmingham, England**.
- **July 22, 1959**, was a momentous day in his life.
- **Rachel B. Lake, MD**, will be the principal speaker.

When in the middle of the sentence and only including month and year, no comma is necessary after the month or year: The average temperatures for July 1998 are the highest on record.

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

- **Mary said**, "See you tomorrow!"
- "We were able," **they answered**, "to complete the assignment."