

Commas: A Five-Step Plan for Proper Punctuation

Believe it or not, comma usage in standard written English can be reduced to about five rules. While the list below is not exhaustive, it covers the most common uses of commas.

1. Use a comma after an introductory words, phrases, and clauses.

- At this time, there are no more tickets available.
- For example, import automobiles often cost more than domestics.
- In the event of an emergency, your seat cushions can be used as flotation devices.
- If I had known that he was giving a quiz, I would have made it to class Tuesday.

2. Use a comma to separate items in a series.

- I would like you to get bread, milk, and cheese at the grocery store.
- A number of factors increase a person's risk of heart disease, such as diet, activity level, and family history.

Note: MLA style requires a comma between the final two elements in a series, but many other style guides do not. When in doubt, ask your instructor which style she prefers.

3. Use a comma to separate clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) in compound sentences.

- I enrolled for 18 hours this semester, but I had to drop two classes before mid-term.
- Erika runs cross-country for her university team, and she also plays basketball in a community league.

4. Use a comma to separate non-essential clauses and appositives.

Some sentences contain clauses that are extraneous to the sentence's meaning. In other words, the information in these clauses is not necessary to the sentence's meaning, but does clarify or add to the sentence.

- Ms. Rembrandt, my English teacher, taught our class to diagram sentences.
- The wedding was held at Marshall Brown's ranch, the Lazy Z.
- The buck, which hadn't yet seen us, suddenly ran when Ray coughed.
- Dr. Sandra Black, who works at the Food and Drug Administration, authored this latest study of Lipitor's effectiveness.

Notice that each of the phrases separated by commas in the examples above can be removed without affecting the meaning of the sentence. In the sentence below, all information is crucial to the meaning, and therefore should not be punctuated with commas.

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- The students who cheated on the test should be suspended from school.

5. **Commas are also commonly used in the following applications:**

To set off parenthetical, transitional, and contrasting elements in a sentence.

- It was my car, not hers, that received most of the damage in the accident.
- Randy's father, as a matter of fact, worked at General Motors for most of his life.

To set off dates, addresses, and numbers.

- The company was chartered on Wednesday, October 19, 1986.
- You can send payment to 765 Jackson Lane, Rockmore, Illinois 44589.

To set off quotations.

- "It's now or never," Marcia shouted before leaping into her first sky-dive.
- Most of us are familiar with the expression, "If you're given lemons, make lemonade."

Watch out for these common misuses of commas:

Comma splice, or two complete sentences joined with a comma.

- It was one of the best days of my life, my sisters and brothers all made it home for the party.

Two complete sentences can be separated with a period, joined with a semicolon, or joined using a comma **and** a coordinating conjunction.

Unnecessary comma in compound elements.

- The traveler's briefcase, and wallet, were stolen at the airport.
- José worked as a chef, and taught high school, before returning to Chicago.

The sentences above use compound subjects or compound predicates. Although these elements use a coordinating conjunction, they do not require a comma.

Unnecessary comma before the first or after the last item in a series.

- I would like you to get, bread, milk, and cheese at the grocery store.
- The painting she completed used reds, oranges, and yellows, to represent the sunset.