

Comma Rules

Modified from Purdue University

1. **Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet.**
2. **Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.**
 - a. *Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while.*
 - i. Do not put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).
 - ii. Correct: She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast)
 - 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).*
 - i. Having finished the test, he left the room.
 - ii. To get a seat, you'd better come early.
 - c. *Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include yes, however, well.*
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:
 - a. If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense?
 - b. Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
 - c. If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?
 - d. 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:
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.**
 - a. Professor Benson, grinning from ear to ear, announced that the exam would be tomorrow.
 - b. Example: The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.
 - c. You should also eliminate any non-essential "that" from your writing.
5. **Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.**
 - a. The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.
 - b. *The comma before the "and" is called the **Oxford Comma**. Some grammarians allow it to be left out. I don't. You will have less trouble using it than leaving it out.*
6. **Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.**
 - a. 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:
 - i. Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
 - ii. Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with and between them?
 - iii. 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:
7. **Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.**
 - a. He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

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.)

- a. Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, 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.

- a. Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.
- b. July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life. Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC?
- c. Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.
- d. *(When you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year: "The average temperatures for July 1998 are the highest on record for that month.")*

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

- a. In 1848, Marx wrote, "Workers of the world, unite!"

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

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

Comma Abuse

1. Don't use a comma to separate the subject from the verb.

- a. Incorrect:An eighteen-year old in California, is now considered an adult.
- b. Incorrect:The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions.

2. Don't put a comma between the two verbs or verb phrases in a compound predicate.

- a. Incorrect:We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study.
- b. Incorrect:I turned the corner, and ran smack into a patrol car.

3. Don't put a comma between the two nouns, noun phrases, or noun clauses in a compound subject or compound object.

- a. Incorrect (compound subject):The music teacher from your high school, and the football coach from mine are married.
- b. Incorrect (compound object):Jeff told me that the job was still available, and that the manager wanted to interview me.

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

- a. Incorrect (extreme contrast):She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken. (incorrect)
- b. Incorrect:The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.
- c. Correct:She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar.(This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast)