

# Commas

## Explanation

Commas have many uses in the English language. They are responsible for everything from setting apart items in a series to making your writing clearer and preventing misreading. Correct comma use is a difficult

skill to master since it requires a combination of grammar knowledge and independent stylistic judgment.

...connections...

For more help understanding sentence combining, turn to Coordinators and Subordinators.

## Sentence Combining

When you are joining ideas, phrases or clauses within a sentence, you often will use a comma for punctuation.

An **independent clause**, also known as a simple sentence, is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb AND *can stand alone* as a sentence. For example

- The child went to the dentist.
- His girlfriend is angry.
- She will buy a new pair of shoes.

You can join an **independent clause** with another independent clause using a coordinator (FANBOYS) and a comma:

- Angelo rides his bike, and Mary takes the bus.
- Marguerite grabbed the diamonds, but Oliver sold them on the black market.

You can easily remember the seven coordinators by keeping in mind the word "FANBOYS":

For And Nor  
Bt Or Yet So

A **dependent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb BUT it *cannot stand alone* because it starts with a subordinator, words like *although, while, since, because, if, until, after*. For example:

- *When* the child went to the dentist
- *Because* his girlfriend is angry
- *Although* she will buy new shoes

You will use a comma to join a **dependent clause** require a comma before it can be attached to the independent clause that finishes the thought:

- Even though Michael was allowed to go to the concert, his mother made sure he had completed all his homework.

If you reverse the order and put the independent clause first and the dependent clause second, however, you **do not** need a comma:

- His mother made sure he had completed all his homework even though Michael was allowed to go to the game.

## Series

You will use commas to separate items in a series containing three or more coordinate elements.

- Ron, Maria, and Jessica play soccer every day after school.
- My favorite vegetables are Brussels sprouts, spinach, and cauliflower.
- I want either fettuccini alfredo, eggplant parmesan, or the linguine with clams in a white sauce.

You will use commas to separate items in a series of two or more coordinate adjectives—adjectives modifying the same idea independent of each other.

- It should be a *slow, lazy* day.
- Seven years passed in a *destructive, whirling* blur.
- He brought his *sleek, shiny* bicycle.

Commas are not required when the adjectives are cumulative, or when they describe different aspects of the same noun.

- Donnie sold me *ten gold* bowling balls.
- My favorites are the *lazy white* clouds.
- He ordered a *delicious chocolate* cake for the party.

## Comma-Adjective Rule

To help you decide whether or not you should use a comma when separating two or more adjectives, ask yourself the following two questions:

- Can the order of the two adjectives be reversed?
- Can the word “*and*” be put between the adjectives?

If either answer is yes, then the adjectives are coordinate, and you should **use** a comma.

- Jessica is an ambitious, intelligent woman.
  - Jessica is an intelligent, ambitious woman. [order reversed] 😊
  - Jessica is an intelligent *and* ambitious woman. [added “*and*”] 😊

If you cannot reverse the order of or add “*and*” to the adjectives, then they are cumulative, and **do not** require a comma.

- Roger has fourteen silver horns.
  - Roger has silver fourteen horns. [The reversed order does not work.] ❌
  - Roger has fourteen *and* silver horns. [The added “*and*” does not work.] ❌

## Setting off Nonessential Elements

Some modifying elements of a sentence are essential, restricting the meaning of a modified term, while others are nonessential and do not restrict the modified term's meaning. These nonessential elements, which can be words, phrases, or clauses, are set off with commas.

	<u>Nonessential</u> (Nonrestrictive)	<u>Essential</u> (Restrictive)
<b>Adjective Clause</b>	Students, <i>who use the majority of the Health Center's services</i> , claim to be especially sick this year. <i>All students claim to be sick this year.</i>	Students <i>who play any school sport</i> will receive free tickets to final game. <i>Only students who play a school sport receive the tickets, not all students.</i>
<b>Prepositional Phrase</b>	The professor, <i>with a wink</i> , dismissed her class early. <i>Removing the phrase "with a wink" doesn't change the meaning of the sentence.</i>	The professor <i>with no students</i> is good for very little. <i>The prepositional phrase "with no students" tells what kind of professor is good for very little; it is essential.</i>
<b>Verbal Phrase</b>	Popular politicians, campaigning in every small town in America, wave the American flag and kiss babies.	The politician campaigning for president has no time for a meaningful personal life.
<b>Appositives</b>	<i>The Big Lebowski</i> , a 1997 Coen Brothers film, is a modern mystery and a Western rolled into one.	The great American movie <i>The Big Lebowski</i> popularized the nickname "Dude."

When deciding whether information is nonessential or essential, ask yourself this question:

- Is the modifier essential to the meaning of the noun or subject it modifies?

**NO:** Nonrestrictive (use commas)

**YES:** Restrictive (no commas)

## Transitional Words and Phrases

Transitional words and phrases qualify, clarify, and make connections between ideas. They are usually set off with commas when they introduce, interrupt, or come at the end of a clause.

<u>Transitions</u>	
however	for example
therefore	on the other hand
thus	typically speaking
nevertheless	as a result
furthermore	
alternatively	

- Nevertheless, she took the bus knowing it would be late.
- On the other hand, money is money and I have to pay my rent.
- Rare horses, however, are something I would consider buying.

Note: When you use a transitional word to combine two independent clauses, you must use a semicolon or punctuate them as two separate sentences.

- Diamonds are rare; however, the coal that makes them is abundant.
- The best dogs raced first; therefore, the spectators all went home before it rained.
- Laughter is the best medicine; of course, penicillin also comes in handy sometimes.
- I wanted to finish quickly. Unfortunately, I still had three exams afterward.

### Quotations

In most cases, use commas to set off a direct quotation from the identifying tag (*he said, she screamed, I wrote* and so on).

- Thoreau said, "To be awake is to be alive."
- "To be awake is to be alive," Thoreau said.
- "To be awake," Thoreau said, "is to be alive."
- "To be awake is to be alive," Thoreau said. "I have never yet met a man who was quite awake."

If the quoted text contains an exclamation point or a question mark, do not use a comma in addition:

- "Should we bring the casserole tonight?" he asked.
- "I love those children!" the father screamed.

Adapted from:

[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_commaess.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_commaess.html) 3/23/06 – 1:00PM &  
*The Brief Holt Handbook, Fourth Edition, Kirszner & Mandell, 2004*

## Exercise 1 – Commas – Dependent & Independent Clauses

Add commas where necessary in the sentences below. Some sentences will not require one.

Examples:

Although my mother told me not to get her a gift, I decided to make her a scrapbook.

I want to give more money to her charity, but I think the IRS already took too much of my salary.

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1. Lately Katherine has wanted more companionship even though she rather likes to be alone.
  2. Jerry vies for her attention but she has so much on her own mind as she suffers through this ordeal.
  3. But whereas Alec acts like a friend he also wants Katherine's admiration.
  4. So that she will be found innocent Miss Smatter will write another's confession.
  5. Jerry eats his sandwich as coolly as the others do yet he can't shake the feeling of deception and mistrust.
  6. Sabrina thinks that the apartment's rent is trivial while Kelly thinks it crucial.
  7. Although Rachel has little say in the matter her friends could use the advice.
  8. Because her dog was hit by a car he walks with a substantial limp.
  9. The doctor set it with pins and even though he didn't scratch at it he was still forced to wear a giant collar.
  10. Either the bill came two weeks later or the doctor sent a collection agency for the money.

## Exercise 2 – Commas – Series and Adjectives

Add commas where necessary in the sentences below. Some sentences will not require one.

Example:

I want to pick fragrant, colorful daffodils, roses, and lilies for my sister's birthday party.

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1. Lately Martin has been picking giant swollen mushrooms from his yard.
2. Sue won the "Vegetable Prize of the Day" that included carrots turnips and leeks.
3. Most people don't know that their favorite chips contain preservatives artificial flavors and MSG.
4. The three tall brothers took the brilliant shining vitamins before playing sports.
5. Watching movies reading books sleeping and exercising are my favorite weekend activities.

## Exercise 3 – Commas – Essential and Nonessential Items

Add commas where necessary in the sentences below. Some sentences will not require one.

Example:

- The racing fans, who rarely wave pennants, showed up in full force on Sunday.
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1. Shelly my mother's step-sister gave me thirty dollars last week.
2. The campus police who rarely arrest any faculty members are responsible for patrolling all night long.
3. The man walking his dog down the street looks like my great-uncle Ted.
4. My grandmother with a terrible scream alerted me to the fire in her closet.
5. Doug gave me three helpings of dessert which was a crème brûlée.
6. Speaking as if he was consumed with fury Louis yelled to the audience.
7. The actor with no siblings starred in the blockbuster movie *Grammar Cop*.
8. The helicopter a Grasker A-7 flew over the otherwise empty desert where two thousand troops slept silently awaiting orders.
9. Without a warrant the police cannot enter your house provided you don't taunt them from within.
10. "Sonny's Blues" the famous story by Baldwin contains rich allegory that weaves along with fascinating symbolism a rich fabric of text accessible to most readers.

## Exercise 4 – Commas – Transitions

Add commas and/or semicolons where necessary in the sentences below.

Example:



- Nevertheless, I wanted to go to the farm to see the llamas.

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1. I didn't want to see the whole country however I did want to visit the biggest states and prettiest parks.
  2. On the other hand Martin said that Oklahoma is worth skipping.
  3. Alternatively I dream about the open road even if it is scary sometimes.
  4. My car takes five quarts of oil typically speaking.
  5. I made the motel reservations already therefore I should leave next week.
  6. Pharmaceuticals as a result are becoming more and more expensive.
  7. Thus I will need to buy a new car before I set off on Sunday.