

The Comma Rules

Introduction

- The comma is a valuable, useful punctuation device because it separates the structural elements of sentences into manageable segments.
- "comma" comes directly from the Greek komma, which means "something cut off" or "a short clause"
- The rules provided here are those found in traditional handbooks; however, in certain rhetorical contexts and for specific purposes, these rules may be broken.

Before Coordinating Conjunctions for Compound Sentences

- Use comma before a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) -- FANBOYS
- Used to connect two independent clauses in a compound sentence
- Ex: Joe has seven chickens, but Jack has three.
- Ex: I asked you to repeat that, yet you didn't.

Set off an Introductory Phrase or Clause

- Introductory clauses are dependent clauses that provide background information or "set the stage" for the main part of the sentence, the independent clause. For example:
- If they want to win, athletes must exercise every day. (introductory dependent clause, main clause)
- Because he kept barking insistently, we threw the ball for Smokey. (introductory dependent clause, main clause)
- Clue: Introductory clauses start with adverbs like after, although, as, because, before, if, since, though, until, when, etc. (We call this a complex sentence)

Important Exception

- Ex: Because she fell, she was late to class.
- Don't put a comma when the dependent clause comes after the independent clause
- Ex: She was late for class, because she fell. ---- WRONG
- Instead: She was late for class because she fell.

Transition/Introductory Words and Phrases

- Use a comma to set off transition words from the rest of the sentence
- 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).
- Ex: Unfortunately, there is no free lunch
- Ex: I don't want to take the test, however, I need to.

Set off an Appositives and Parenthetical Phrases

- An appositive is a noun or pronoun -- often with modifiers -- set beside another noun or pronoun to explain or identify it.
- Parenthetical = (like Parentheses)
- Only put commas before and after appositives when the sentence would make still sense without the appositive (non-restrictive)
- Ex: Bill, my brother, got a job.

Don't use a comma when...

- after a brief prepositional phrase. (Less than five words)
- after a restrictive (essential) appositive phrase.
- to separate the subject from the predicate.
- Ex: Preparing and submitting his report to the committee for evaluation and possible publication [x] was one of the most difficult tasks Bill had ever attempted.
- To start a new business without doing market research and long-term planning in advance [x] would be foolish.
- Extracting the most profit for the least expenditure on labor and materials [x] is the primary goal of a capitalist.

Separate Adjectives

- Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives that describe the same noun
- (coordinating adjectives) describe the same noun equally (Does it make sense to put in an and?)
- Ex: I will go into the small, cramped room.
- Not: The powerful [x] summer sun beat down upon them.



Quoted Words and Dialogue

Use a comma to set off quoted words and dialogue

- Before the quote
 - Ex: I said, "go to the mall."
- After the quote
 - Ex: "Go to the mall," I said.
- Use a comma to set off the noun you are directly talking to.
 - Ex: Mom, go get me a soda.

Phrases that Express Contrast

- Use a comma to set off phrases that express contrast or a distinct pause or shift
- Ex: You need to pay attention now, not later.
- Ex: The game is today, not tomorrow.
 - Write your own example below:

Mild Interjections

- Use a comma to set off mild interjections!
- Ex: Oh, it will freeze.
- Ex: My gosh, that's smart.

More Comma Abuse

- Don't use a comma to separate a subject from the verb
 - An ant, is the smallest bug.
- Don't put a comma between 2 verbs in a compound predicate
 - We put on our music, and began to study.
- Don't put a comma between 2 nouns (or noun phrases) in a compound subject
 - The music teacher, and the football coach are married

Separate Items in a Series or List

- Use commas to separate items of three or more things
- The last comma is sometimes left out (serial comma)
 - Ex: Milk, bread, and cheese

Dates and Years

- Used to separating the day from the year when also writing the month.
 - Ex: March 19, 2005
 - Ex: June 17, 1905

Large Numbers

- Used to present large numbers in more readable forms
 - Every 3 Places
 - Ex: 1,500,275 = One million, five hundred thousand, two hundred seventy-five
- **Fun fact – In Europe and other countries, they use commas as decimal points and spaces for commas**

City and States

- Used to separate the city from the state
 - Ex: Havertown, PA
 - Ex: Orlando, Florida

Names and Titles

- Ex: Dr. Brown, PhD.
- Ex: Mrs. Smith, R.N., B.S.
- Also when using the last name first
- Ex: Bond, James

