



The Writing Lab

Commas

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

Often, writers want to use commas for any pauses that occur within a sentence. Or, writers have been told to put in commas whenever writers “breathe.” Or, writers get nervous and start sprinkling in commas at random. It is better to learn the following rules. Don’t use a comma unless you can specifically justify its existence.

Use 1: Commas and Coordinating Conjunctions

If you have **two complete sentences** that are divided by a coordinating conjunction (**for**, **and**, **nor**, **but**, **or**, **yet**, **so** = fanboys), you need a comma. If you don’t have two complete sentences, you don’t need the comma.

My brother Chris and his wife Yukiko live in Guam **, and** they own their own diving company.
[sentence 1] [sentence 2]

>>>>In this case, a comma is needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “and” is a complete sentence: they own their own diving company.

My brother Chris and his wife Yukiko live in Guam **and** own their own diving company.
[sentence 1] [not a sentence]

>>>>In this case, a comma is not needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “and” is not a complete sentence: own their own diving company.

Here is another example:

I love going out with my friends on New Year’s Eve, **but** I always end up eating too much food.
[sentence 1] [sentence 2]

>>>>In this case, a comma is needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “but” is a complete sentence: I always end up eating too much food.

I love going out with my friends on New Year’s Eve **but** end up eating too much food.
[sentence 1] [not a sentence]

>>>>In this case, a comma is not needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “but” is not a complete sentence: always end up too much food.

And one final example:

Do you want to see *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* **, or** would you rather see *Hugo* tomorrow?
[sentence 1] [sentence 2]

>>>>In this case, a comma is needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “or” is a complete sentence, in this case, a question: would you rather see *Hugo* tomorrow?

Do you want to go to see *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* **or** *Hugo* tomorrow?
[sentence 1] [not a sentence]

>>>>In this case, a comma is not needed because what follows the coordinating conjunction “or” is not a complete sentence: *Hugo* tomorrow?

Use 2: Commas and Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Often, writers lead into their main sentences with information before the subject of the sentence is presented. This information can be a single word or a group of words. What you want to do is identify your sentence's main subject, and if you have a word or group of words that appears before that subject, you generally need a comma. Here are some examples:

Last night on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart interviewed the Tom Hanks about his newest film.
[subject]

When my mom makes a cake, she lets my little sister lick the spoon so she won't start crying.
[subject]

After watching scary movies, I find it hard to fall asleep at night because I hear strange sounds in the house.
[subject]

Yesterday, Tina saw a double rainbow in the sky and asked herself, "What does this mean?"
[subject]

Use 3: Commas and Series of Words or Phrases

Probably one of the most well-known comma rules is the "rule of three or more." If you write a sentence where you have three or more items in a series, you use commas in between the items and the final "and." Note that this rule applies to both words and phrases. Here are some examples:

A series of three involving individual words: When I go out to Target after work, I need to remember to pick up shampoo, conditioner, and Kleenex.

A series of three involving a group of words: Over winter break, I got to spend time with my family, meet up with a bunch of old friends, and watch old episodes of *The X-Files*.

Did you know that the comma that comes before the final "and" in your series is called the Oxford comma? Maybe one day, you'll be on Jeopardy, and that will be the big question at the end for all the money 😊.

Use 4: Commas and Dependent Clauses That Come before Independent Clauses

OK, before we get started, let's review a few terms. An **independent clause** is the fancy term for a complete sentence. A sentence contains a subject (usually the "do-er" of the action), a verb (usually the action), and sometimes a "completer" (some word or words that finishes the thought). If you read an independent clause out loud, it sounds complete.

A **dependent clause**, on the other hand, contains a subject, a verb, and sometimes a "completer." However, a dependent clause cannot stand on its own and be meaningful. It needs to be connected to an independent clause (complete sentence) to make sense. If you read a dependent clause out loud, it sounds incomplete. You are prompted to ask or think, "...And???"

Dependent clauses can be connected to independent clauses at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sentence. Here are some examples:

If you aren't here by noon, we'll have to leave for the ice rink without you.
[dependent clause because of "if"] [independent clause because these words can stand on their own]

>>>>The first part, "If you aren't here by noon" is a dependent clause. This is not a complete thought. If you aren't here by noon...WHAT? Because the dependent clause comes **before** the independent clause, you need a comma.

We will, if you aren't here by noon, have to leave for the ice rink without you.
[first part of independent clause] [dependent clause] [second part of independent clause]

>>>>In this example, the dependent clause is put into the middle of the independent clause. Note the use of commas to separate the dependent from the independent clause. When dependent clauses can be put into the **middle** of independent clauses, these constructions can sometimes be more difficult to understand.

We will have to leave for the ice rink without you if you aren't here by noon.
[independent clause] [dependent clause]

>>>>In this example, the independent clause comes first and then is followed by the dependent clause. However, since the dependent clause comes **after** the independence clause, you do not need a comma.

Here is another example:

In this example, the dependent clause (because she is very athletic) can appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sentence. Notice where the commas go in each case.

Because she is very athletic, Sara spends hours at the gym.
[dependent clause] [independent clause]

>>>>A comma is needed after the dependent clause.

Sara spends because she is very athletic, hours at the gym.
[first part of independent clause] [dependent clause] [second part of independent clause]

>>>>Commas are need on each side of the dependent clause.

Sara spends hours at the gym because she is very athletic.
[independent clause] [no comma] [dependent clause]

>>>>No comma needed between the independent and the dependent clauses.

To sum up:

Dependent clause , independent clause.

First part of independent clause , dependent clause , second part of independent clause.

Independent clause **[no comma]** dependent clause.

Here are the most common words that indicate dependent clauses		
after	once	until
although	provided that	when
as	rather than	whenever
because	since	where
before	so that	whereas
even if	than	wherever
even though	that	whether
if	though	while
in order that	unless	why

Use 5: Commas That Introduce Direct Quotations

You need to note these rules to determine if you need a comma with a direct quotation.

When to use a comma: Use a comma when you introduce a quotation by using the author's name with an action verb **and** when the quotation is a **complete sentence**. Here are some sample action verbs: suggests, writes, states, says, comments.

>>>>Harold Jorgensen **writes**, "The one word that was completely overused by the end of last season's Project Runway was fierce." >> quotation is a complete sentence, so the comma is needed.

When not to use a comma: If you put the word "that" in front of your quotation, you omit the comma and lowercase the first word of the quotation unless that word is a proper noun.

>>>>Harold Jorgensen **writes that** the "one word that was completely overused by the end of last season's *Project Runway* was fierce."

>>>>Harold Jorgensen **writes that** the word "fierce" was "completely overused by the end of last season's *Project Runway*."

Use 6: Commas That Prevent Confusing Sentences.

Sometimes, you need to use a comma to prevent confusing your reader. Consider this sentence:

After shedding snakes look for something to eat.

There are two ways to interpret the meaning of this sentence:

After shedding snakes [you should] look for something to eat.

>>>>As people don't shed snakes (other than maybe Medusa in Greek mythology), this interpretation is just creepy.

After shedding, snakes look for something to eat.

>>>>After snakes shed their skins, they then look for something to eat. Let's hope this is the meaning the author intended.

A Final Thought about Commas

Of all punctuation points, commas give writers the most trouble because there are so many different uses for commas. Again, try to explain to yourself **why** you want to use a comma. Have a reason for that comma's existence. Doing so will help you, over time, learn the rules so you can make these punctuation decisions more easily.

Moral of the story: If you can't come up with a specific reason for using a comma, omit the comma.