

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Commas

Many writers are confused about comma usage. Actually, comma usage is not difficult if you will remember that comma usage guidelines are based in logic. The following basic uses for the comma are discussed in this chapter:

- Commas with independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction
- Commas to separate items in a series
- Commas to set off introductory elements
- Commas to set off nonrestrictive elements
- Commas to set off words of direct address
- Commas to separate coordinate adjectives
- Commas with dates, addresses, names of places, numbers
- Commas to prevent misreading

With some practice, you will be able to distinguish when to use commas; then you will feel more comfortable with them. Unfortunately, we are sometimes told to consider each comma as a pause in the sentence. This guideline will not always work effectively. Spoken and written language are different, and pausing in speaking is not the same as using a comma in writing. Try not to think in terms of pauses; rather think in terms of logical usage guidelines. One general principle usually will work: If in doubt whether to use a comma or not, check the guidelines; if the guidelines do not call for a comma, do not use one.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSES JOINED BY COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

When you use more than one independent clause in a sentence, you should use punctuation to indicate its importance as a separate and complete idea. **Use the comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, yet, or, nor, so, for*) joining independent clauses.**

Example: The orchestra began to play, and the audience listened in awe.

Look at these additional examples:

- The assignment is due on Friday, but I cannot hand mine in until Monday.
- I will always remember Anita, for her advice was helpful.
- She went to the company yesterday, and she applied for a job as a grant writer.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions.

Example: Children usually like clowns, but my son is afraid of them.

1. Let me know if you need a new floppy diskette or I will cancel your order.
2. Celeste answered the phone but she did not recognize the caller's voice.
3. His research paper had no outline so it was poorly organized.
4. I worked as a parts driver last summer and I will work as a cashier this summer.
5. He sat alone in the courtroom and he waited for the judge.
6. Nylon was developed over fifty years ago and billions of pounds of nylon fiber are now made yearly.
7. She wanted to buy a dishwasher for her mother but her father had already done so.
8. Joe and Carrie are going to be veterinarians for they both enjoy working with animals.
9. Mitch filled the tub with steaming water and he climbed in for a relaxing bath.
10. I will meet you at Max's apartment or I will meet you at the theater.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences with independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions and the correct punctuation.

Example: *Robert is a brilliant man, but he has no common sense.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

ITEMS IN A SERIES

A series includes three or more items of equal importance. If the items are not separated, they run together and confuse your reader. **Use the comma to separate three or more items in a series. The last comma in a series may be omitted.** A series can include words, phrases, or clauses:

Words: The old, lazy, and fat dog slept on the back porch.

or

The old, lazy and fat dog slept on the back porch.
(The comma preceding *and* is optional.)

Phrases: We like to waterski, to swim, and to sunbathe.

Dependent Clauses: They go to New Mexico and Arizona every summer because the scenery is lovely, because the historical sites are interesting, and because the food is tasty.

Independent Clauses: Lynn bought the tickets for the film, Mike bought the popcorn, and I found the best seats.

When the items in a series are independent clauses, remember that there must be at least three, and you must use a coordinating conjunction; otherwise, you will have a comma splice. Look at the following examples:

Incorrect: Lynn bought the tickets for the film, Mike bought the popcorn.
(comma splice)

Incorrect: Lynn bought the tickets for the film, Mike bought the popcorn, I found the best seats.
(comma splice)



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the items in a series in the sentences below.

Example: I cannot find my ballet shoes, my leg warmers, or my tights.

1. Robert Frost Tess Ghalleger and Paul Shuttleworth are my favorite poets.
2. His goals are to complete an associate's degree to land a position with a major electronics company and to get married.
3. Rod took care of the children while I shopped for groceries while I went to the phone company and while I visited my father.
4. He will major in history anthropology or chemistry.
5. Today he repaired the roof replaced the broken window and mowed the lawn.
6. Patience kindness and humility are her virtues.
7. The box contained pencils and one pen.
8. The alarm clock buzzed the phone rang and the doorbell sounded.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences with items in a series and punctuate correctly.

Example: (words) For everyone in my family, surviving the holidays requires humor, patience, and sleep.

1. (words) _____

2. (phrases) _____

3. (dependent clauses) _____

4. (independent clauses) _____

INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS

Most introductory elements are set off from the main independent clause in a sentence. If you do not set off introductory elements, your reader could easily become confused because the introductory element will run into the main subject and verb.

Use the comma to set off introductory elements from the main part of the sentence. Introductory elements include words, phrases, and clauses. Here are some examples:

Transitional words:

Yes, I know how to change a tire.

However, you are not paying attention.

Mild interjections:

Well, I decided to go with you.

Oh, she forgot to mention it.

Long prepositional phrases:

After an unusually violent and destructive thunderstorm, we were relieved to see the sun.

Elements containing a verb form:

Laughing, they walked out of the room.

To study effectively, one must know the proper method.

Preparing for the Easter holiday, department stores have increased their inventory of stuffed animals.

Absolute phrases:

His work completed, Ryan went home early.

Dependent clauses beginning with subordinating conjunctions:

Because he is so reliable, he is in charge of industrial relations.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the introductory elements in the sentence below.

Example: When Charlotte got a raise, she was shocked.

1. No I cannot answer the question.
2. On the first Monday of each month our discussion group meets in the library.
3. To make good brownies use fresh ingredients.
4. Muttering Sharon left the room.
5. The project completed the research team took a long rest.
6. Beginning a new relationship Howard and Angie were still cautious with each other.
7. Because the car was dented in the hailstorm she had to have it repaired.



EXERCISE 2 ▶ Write your own sentences with introductory elements and punctuate correctly.

Example: (long prepositional phrase) *After a long and leisurely dinner,* _____
we took a nap. _____

1. (word) _____

2. (long prepositional phrase) _____

3. (element containing a verb form) _____

4. (absolute phrase) _____

5. (dependent clause) _____

NONRESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS

A *nonrestrictive element* is a word, phrase, or clause that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. A nonrestrictive element simply adds additional information rather than essential identification or restriction. A sentence read without the nonrestrictive element still makes sense. Look at the following example:

Cimarron Review, a journal of arts and letters, is published at Oklahoma State University.

Without the nonrestrictive element, the sentence still makes sense:

Cimarron Review is published at Oklahoma State University.

Nonrestrictive elements should be set off from the rest of the sentence because they add incidental information, not essential information. **Use the comma to set off nonrestrictive elements in a sentence.** Here are some examples:

Appositives (a renaming word or phrase):

Dr. Everson, my professor, is giving his lecture this morning.

Nonrestrictive clauses:

Ann Berlin, who is my supervisor, will be here at noon.

Nightly Business Report, which airs at 6:00 P.M., is informative.

My computer, which is ten years old, need to be replaced.

Nonrestrictive phrases:

Maggie Palmer, wearing the Indian costume, won first prize.

Amber, complaining in a loud voice, got everyone's attention.

Parenthetical expressions (an expression that interrupts the sentence and is not part of the main idea):

The poetry of Margaret Atwood, for example, includes vivid imagery.

Her reasons are, I believe, sound and convincing.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the nonrestrictive elements in the sentences below.

Example: Tuttle Junior High, my old school, is where I now teach.

1. Walter singing a lullaby to the baby is a good father.
2. These sentences for example contain too many commas.
3. His set of books on constitutional law which Marion borrowed has not been returned.
4. Dallas my home is a friendly city.
5. The breakfast dishes blue and white china were washed and put away.
6. Joshua who never ties his shoelaces fell down the front steps.
7. *On Common Ground* Helena's favorite poetry anthology was published in 1983.
8. Della and her cousin wanting to improve their writing skills went to a writing clinic in New Orleans.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences with the nonrestrictive elements indicated in parentheses.

Example: (nonrestrictive clause) I like to watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is on TV many times during the Christmas season.

1. (appositive) _____

2. (appositive) _____

3. (nonrestrictive clause) _____

4. (nonrestrictive clause) _____

5. (nonrestrictive phrase) _____

6. (nonrestrictive phrase) _____

7. (parenthetical expression) _____

8. (parenthetical expression) _____

DIRECT ADDRESS

When you are writing to someone and using the person's name or another word to directly speak to that person, you are using *direct address*. Look at the following example:

Ken, please close the door as you leave.

Use the comma to set off words of direct address. Here are some examples:

Roy, you never told me you were married.

We are happy, sir, to have you with us.

Students, close your test booklets now.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the forms of direct address in the sentences below.

Example: Shana, will you help me clean the house?

1. Listen to me boys and girls.
2. Jonathan your science project won second place.
3. Mr. Andrews we will replace your camera immediately.
4. Are you consulting an attorney Mary Lee?
5. Our manager will return in an hour sir.
6. Your expression Beth is one of shock.
7. Professor when will we get our test results?
8. Now Mrs. Bynum you can come into the examining room.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences using forms of direct address and punctuating correctly.

Example: *Debbie, please answer the phone.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

COORDINATE ADJECTIVES

Coordinate adjectives are equal in importance. If a coordinating conjunction such as *and* is not used to join such adjectives, a comma should be used instead. **Use the comma to separate coordinate adjectives.** Look at the following example:

Television advertising is full of misleading, trivial information.

As a test to see whether a comma is needed, substitute the word *and* where you had planned to use a comma. If the sentence makes sense, then the comma is right. Look at the following example:

Television advertising is full of misleading and trivial information.

Another test is to rearrange the adjectives. If the sentence still makes sense, then the comma is right:

Television advertising is full of trivial, misleading information.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the coordinate adjectives in the sentences below.

Example: The tall, beautiful woman waited in line at the box office.

1. Dry dusty roads turn to red mud when it rains.
2. The slender pale man slowly closed his eyes.
3. When will this long boring pointless lecture end?
4. Her clothes are usually practical and stylish.
5. Enormous amounts of money have been spent on repairing the long dangerous stretch of highway.
6. She is sensitive to loud harsh sounds.
7. Mount Rushmore is an interesting educational national memorial.
8. Elliot is not feeling well because he has a severe painful sunburn.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences with coordinate adjectives and punctuate correctly.

Example: *Maine is a cold, snowy state in the winter.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

DATES, ADDRESSES, NAMES OF PLACES, NUMBERS

If conventional dates, addresses, and names of places are made up of more than one part, those parts are usually separated. **Use the comma to separate the parts of a date. If the date appears within a sentence, use a comma following the last item in the date.** Here is an example:

She was born on Monday, July 11, 1949, early in the morning.

If a date is inverted, rather than in the conventional order, commas are not needed:

I returned the merchandise on 28 November 1988.

If a date includes only a month and a year, commas are not needed:

The book was published in December 1987.

Use the comma to separate the parts of an address, including the name of a place, and use the comma to follow the last item in an address within a sentence. Here are some examples:

Her new address is 5300 Walnut Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

My mother-in-law moved from Dallas, Texas, to Clinton, Oklahoma.

A comma is not needed between the name of a state and a zip code:

Send the package to Luke in Hollywood, California 90027.

Use the comma to separate numbers of more than four digits. Place a comma every three digits, counting from the right. Here is an example:

More than 10,000 signatures were on the petition.

Separate the numbers in groups of three, counting from the right:

China is a country that occupies 3,782,612 square miles.

The comma in a number of four digits is optional:

We made \$4,000 last month.

or

We made \$4000 last month.



EXERCISE 1 ► Punctuate the dates, addresses, and names of places in the sentences below.

Example: The murderer was found in Atlanta, Georgia.

1. His new address is 6249 Windsor Londonderry New Hampshire 03053.
2. The auction was held on September 2 1987.
3. Rosalee sold 1200 subscriptions to the newspaper.
4. The graduation ceremony was held on the evening of Monday May 9 1988 at 7:30 P.M.
5. His military career began in October 1980.
6. The catalogue was mailed to 5460 Pine View Drive Winston-Salem North Carolina 27105.
7. India occupies 1246880 square miles.
8. My aunt and uncle moved to San Diego California last month.



EXERCISE 2 ► Write your own sentences using dates, addresses, and numbers.

Example: (date) *She was born on July 1, 1970.* _____

1. (date) _____
2. (date) _____
3. (address) _____
4. (address) _____
5. (long number) _____

PREVENTION OF MISREADING

Occasionally, some words in a sentence may run together in a confusing way. In such a sentence, a comma can prevent the reader from misreading the sentence. Look at the following examples:

Confusing: On page 144 101 misspelled words were found. (How many misspelled words?)

Clear: On page 144, 101 misspelled words were found.

Occasionally, the addition of a comma might not make the meaning of the sentence clear; instead, you can rewrite the sentence:

Confusing: Soon after he left the auditorium. (Soon after he left what?)

With comma: Soon after, he left the auditorium. (Sentence is still not clear.)

Rewritten: He left the auditorium soon after the intermission.

Always be sure that you are not writing a comma splice or run-on sentence, however. Comma splices and run-on sentences cannot be corrected by adding only a comma.



EXERCISE 1 ▶ Punctuate the following sentences to prevent misreading.

Example: For Corbin, Sam was the perfect mate.

1. In the kitchen cabinet space is limited.
2. Out of 107 103 employees were promoted.
3. Rusty the dog ran off with your tennis shoe.
4. In a car seat belts are a necessity.
5. In Iowa city limits are well marked.
6. In our bedroom closets are too small.
7. While we were eating the cat ran across the room.
8. Interestingly enough people attended the opening of the junk art exhibit.

MISUSE OF COMMAS

To prevent misusing commas, first you should check the guidelines. Then be sure you are not overusing the comma.

1. Do not use the comma to separate a subject and verb (unless the words between them require punctuation).

Incorrect: Several men in suits, walked into the conference room.

Correct: Several men in suits walked into the conference room.

2. Do not use the comma to separate two words or phrases joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: The window installer, and his assistant took a short break.

Correct: The window installer and his assistant took a short break.

Incorrect: The sale of toy guns, and tanks has increased.

Correct: The sale of toy guns and tanks has increased.

EXERCISE 1 ▶ Circle any commas used incorrectly in the sentences below.

Example: Jess , and Mildred are my grandparents.

1. Jack, Amy, and Molly are interested in renting a houseboat this summer.
2. The story of her life, is an intriguing one.
3. Three of the corporation executives resigned after the scandal, and the newspaper articles.

4. One of the best teachers I ever had, was Dr. Russell.
5. Bert, and Raphael traveled across the country, and visited every state.
6. Our mythology instructor, requires three reports this semester.
7. The quiet, intelligent boy, sat in the back corners of the classroom.
8. Unfortunately, the questionnaire that we sent out, was not returned.



EXERCISE 2 ► In the paragraph below, correct any misused commas, and add any omitted commas.

The characteristic that makes George special, and successful is his optimistic attitude. He always tries to be his best with people in job situations and in personal relationships. For example he would do anything for his family. When his sister moved to Boulder Colorado he dropped everything he was doing to make her feel comfortable and cared for. He helped her find a job, he moved her into a new apartment, and he introduced her to his friends. To keep her from being lonely in a new strange city he would often show up at her front door just to give her a hug and a pint of ice cream. George's positive attitude something that cannot be ignored is also responsible for his success in his work. He really listens to the people he works with, and he thinks of new ways to improve the working environment. Most importantly George is a wonderful man to have as a friend. He is nonjudgmental honest considerate and spontaneous. His eyes sparkle and the corners of his mouth turn upward. However it is not his physical appearance that makes him a delightful person to know. Even though he is over six feet tall he always seems to be on the level of the person he is with. George is a happy person and he can find the bright side of everyone and everything.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Semicolons

A *semicolon* is used to join two sentences with closely related ideas of equal importance. Look at the following example:

I enjoyed the physiology course; I learned more than I had expected.

Although using the semicolon can give your sentences some variety, it can be overused. Use it only when you want to bring the equally important ideas in the two sentences close together.

Remember that a semicolon is not a substitute for a comma. Nor is the semicolon always interchangeable with a period. While the period signals a complete stop, the semicolon joins closely related ideas.

Use the semicolon to join independent clauses that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction. Look at the following example:

He plays tennis every weekend; he pretends to be a great athlete.

If the independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction, then the semicolon is not necessary:

He plays tennis every weekend, *and* he pretends to be a great athlete.

Use the semicolon to join independent clauses joined by a conjunctive adverb. Look at the following example:

Lorene read the essay; however, she did not understand it.

Usually, a comma follows the conjunctive adverb.

Note that another use for the semicolon exists; however, it should be reserved for those writers who are very comfortable with sentence structure and who know how to use punctuation correctly. If you have not quite achieved this level, it is best that you use the semicolon only as described earlier in this chapter. If you are sure of your punctuation skills, then you might want to try this usage: **Use the semicolon to separate items in a series if those items contain a number of commas.** Look at the example:

She has felt, like many of her friends, a dulling of the senses; has thrived, like her brother, on a double life; and is, like her grandmother, afraid of experiencing loneliness.



EXERCISE 1 ► Add necessary semicolons to the sentences below. If the sentence includes a conjunctive adverb, add the appropriate comma also.

Example: It snowed six inches last night; it also sleeted for an hour.

1. They never argue or disagree they have a most remarkable relationship.
2. I enjoyed the photographic essay on Moscow I studied it all evening.
3. Pablo is a writer and graduate student his major is transpersonal psychology.
4. The room temperature tends to fluctuate consequently the houseplants will not grow well.
5. His apathy is overwhelming his laziness is merely annoying.

6. The skin cleanser has a nonallergenic formula therefore I decided to try it.
7. For an artist-in-residence in the public schools, twenty hours a week are spent in contact time with the students the remaining twenty hours are designated as studio time for the artist.
8. The panel listened to the arguments for and against the validity of the insanity plea nevertheless the panel members could not come to a decision.



EXERCISE 2 ▶ Write your own sentences using semicolons between independent clauses. Use a conjunctive adverb in the first three sentences.

Example: *The fog made driving hazardous; however, she drove carefully.* _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

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