



THE COMMA

Commas are one of the most frequently used punctuation marks. Unfortunately, commas are also the most frequently misused punctuation mark. Having a reference tool available is always a good idea when you are not sure about how a comma rule applies to your sentence, but the abundance of comma rules can sometimes be frustrating. In this chapter, you will find a few ways to help you use comma rules more effectively.

In this section, comma rules are presented in the order of frequently used sentence-level comma rules followed by less frequently used rules. In addition to this useful set-up, you will also find a laminated one-page **QUICK EDITING ROADMAP** inside your copy of this handbook. Using up-to-date research on college writing, I have developed this guide as a quick reference to the sentence-level rules that confuse writers the most. Half of the rules included on the **QUICK EDITING ROADMAP** are comma rules.

15a

Set off introductory words, phrases, and clauses

1. Set off introductory words and phrases

Commas are often used to set off introductory words and phrases. If the word or phrase includes a verb, a comma should always be used to separate the word or phrase from the main sentence.



- **Shocked**, Alex put out his cigarette when he saw the new No Smoking sign.
- **Frustrated by the new sign**, Alex put out his cigarette.

If the introductory word is a single preposition or adverb, you may omit the comma.

- **Yesterday** the guests grumbled about the new sign.

If the introductory prepositional phrase is short (usually viewed as being five words or fewer), you may also omit the comma.

- **Below the stage** the guests grumbled about the new sign.

Helpful hint

If you are unsure about punctuating an introductory word, phrase, or clause, use a comma. The presence of a comma, rather than its absence, is always a good choice.

- Yesterday, the guests grumbled about the new sign.
- Below the stage, the guests grumbled about the new sign.

2. Set off introductory clauses

Always use a comma after an introductory clause. The use of a verb in any kind of introductory word, phrase, or clause is the clue to always using a comma.

- **Since he had recently quit smoking**, Alex was happy to see the new No Smoking sign.
- **Although Chris was unhappy about the new sign**, Alex was quite content.

EXERCISE 1



Directions: Use commas to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses where needed.

1. Also called a paragraph mark or marker the pilcrow is a symbol that signifies individual paragraphs.
2. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* the entry for *pilcrow* gives c. 1440 as the earliest use for the word.
3. Inserted at the point where a paragraph should begin the pilcrow is a useful tool for copyediting.
4. In desktop publishing the pilcrow usually marks a new paragraph or the carriage return following a paragraph.
5. Although the pilcrow can be useful for editing it is rarely used when documenting sources.

15b

Combine independent clauses in compound sentences

A comma is used between two independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction, such as any of the **FANBOYS**—*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*.

Independent clause/simple sentence → Chris was unhappy about the new sign.

Independent clause/simple sentence → Alex was quite content about the new sign.

Compound sentence → Chris was unhappy about the new sign, **but** Alex was quite content.

Be sure that the clauses on each side of the comma + conjunction are independent. A comma is never used between conjoined noun phrases or conjoined verb phrases.

Misused comma → Chris, and Alex had a terrible argument outside the building.

OK → Chris and Alex had a terrible argument outside the building.

Misused comma → Chris was unhappy about the sign, and left campus early.

OK → Chris was unhappy about the sign and left campus early.

You can sometimes omit the comma when the two clauses are short—this is not always acceptable to all instructors or editors, though. You will always be correct if you include it.

→ Chris was unhappy and he left.

→ Chris was unhappy, and he left.

EXERCISE 2

Directions: Add commas in the following sentences when and where needed. Some sentences may not need commas. Be able to explain why you chose to add a comma.

1. An asterisk is a typographical symbol or it can also be classified as a glyph.
2. The asterisk symbol resembles a star and the word *asterisk* comes from the Greek for “little star.”
3. Some printers and computer programmers refer to the asterisk as a *splat*.
4. Three asterisks together can be used to represent a change of thought or scene but an asterisk on its own can also represent zero.
5. A great defensive play in baseball can be noted on a baseball trading card with an asterisk.

15c

Separate items in a series

Commas are used to separate words, phrases, or clauses in a series. A series contains at least three items that are parallel with each other (e.g., three nouns or three phrases).

- **Chris, Alex, and Max** spent three hours arguing about the new signs around campus.
- I saw the three musketeers—**Chris, Alex, and Max**—outside the building.
- Chris **talked, cajoled, and yelled** as he tried to convince the administrators.
- As I left the building, Max was **taking down the sign, yelling at some strangers, and jumping up and down**.

If the items in a series that you are connecting already have commas, use semi-colons to separate them.

- When the campus police arrived, they wanted to ticket Chris, who began the argument; Alex, who escalated the argument; and Max, who threw the first punch.

15d

Set off non-essential elements

Commas can be used to enclose non-essential information that is included in a sentence. To be non-essential, the information needs to be unnecessary for a reader to understand the central meaning of the sentence.

1. Relative clauses

Relative clauses can be essential or non-essential when it comes to understanding the main meaning of the full sentence. Relative clauses that are not necessary are non-restrictive and need to be set off by commas.

- Chris and Alex, **who were in my English class**, were arguing violently.

In the above sentence, the information about which class Chris and Alex were in is non-essential to the meaning of the independent clause.

If a relative clause is essential to the full meaning of the sentence, it is restrictive and should not have any commas around it.

→ The audience **that was closest to Chris and Alex** was getting violent as well.

In the sentence above, the relative clause (“that was closest to Chris and Alex”) is essential information. It was just the audience closest to Chris and Alex who were getting violent, not those in the audience farther away.

Using *that* for non-essential relative clauses and a comma plus a relative pronoun, such as *which* or *who*, for essential relative clauses is a way that some editors and writers help distinguish between non-essential and essential sentence elements. If you are required to follow MLA (Modern Language Association) or APA (American Psychological Association) guidelines, follow this convention. However, even MLA acknowledges that some writers do not follow this convention, so it’s a good idea to check with your instructor about this grammar rule that is in flux.

Remember, though, that punctuation works together with meaning. Two sentences that look almost the same can use different punctuation due to the meaning the writer has in mind.

Non-restrictive relative clause → Tennessee, **which is a beautiful state**, has all the signs of a bad economy.

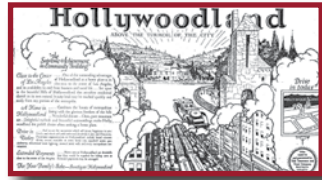
Restrictive relative clause → I like the Tennessee **that is a beautiful state** and not the one **that has signs of a bad economy**.

In the first sentence above, the main idea of the sentence can be understood without the relative clause *which is a beautiful state*. This makes the relative clause non-essential, requiring commas. In the second sentence, the main idea of the sentence can only be understood with the two relative clauses *that is a beautiful state* and *that has signs of a bad economy* included. This makes the two relative clauses essential, thus requiring no commas.

2. Participial phrases

Participial phrases are verb phrases that describe nouns. They take commas wherever they occur—at the beginning of the sentence, in the middle of the sentence, or at the end of the sentence.

Sentence with participial phrase →
The Hollywood sign, **first built in 1923**, was restored in 1978 with money from Gene Autry, Alice Cooper, and others.



Sentence with participial phrase → The Hollywood sign, **located in Griffith Park and not Hollywood**, was restored in 1978 with money from Gene Autry, Alice Cooper, and others.

3. Appositives

Appositives are nouns, noun phrases, and noun clauses that rename nouns. The same restrictive/non-restrictive comma rule that applies to relative clauses applies to appositives (see 15d for more information on restrictive and non-restrictive elements).

Sentence with non-restrictive appositive → The Hollywood sign, **a national monument**, was restored in 1978 with money from Gene Autry, Alice Cooper, and others.

Sentence with restrictive appositive → The musician **Alice Cooper** helped fund the restoration of the Hollywood sign.

EXERCISE 3

&

Directions: Add commas where needed, setting off non-essential clauses, phrases, and appositives. Not all sentences will need a comma.

1. The ampersand is a symbol that represents the word *and*.
2. The ampersand is rarely used in academic writing which is more formal than personal writing.
3. However, if an ampersand is part of the name of a business such as in Jacoby & Meyers, then a writer should use the ampersand.
4. In APA documentation style, the ampersand representing the word *and* is used.
5. Stephen Fry now a prolific author and Hugh Laurie now television's Dr. House performed a skit about ampersands on their television show.

15e

Separate coordinate adjectives

A comma is used to separate coordinate adjectives. Adjectives are considered coordinate when they directly and equally modify a noun phrase. One test to see whether you are using coordinate adjectives is to reverse their order—if the original modification relationship exists, you have coordinate adjectives. Another test to see whether you are using coordinate adjectives is to place an *and* between the two adjectives—once again, if the original meaning exists, you have coordinate adjectives.

- ➔ Sam and Alex saw the **dull, unappealing** billboard for the movie and changed their minds about seeing it.
- ➔ Sam and Alex saw the **unappealing, dull** billboard for the movie and changed their minds about seeing it.

DID YOU KNOW?

“Put a comma where you pause.” Have you ever been told to punctuate based upon how a sentence is spoken? While you’ll get in trouble if you follow this advice too much, it’s not entirely misguided. Punctuation marks were originally intended to aid orators when reading a text aloud, and only in the past 100 or so years has punctuation become standardized. The comma can be traced back to the 3rd century BCE when Aristophanes of Byzantium invented a system of dots to separate verse; different groupings of dots represented different types of breaths needed to complete the reading of part of a text. Although the word comma comes from the Greek *komma* (“something cut off”), the shape of today’s comma was standardized in the 16th century when the original comma—the diagonal slash (/)—dropped to the bottom of the line and curved.



15f

Set off interrupters

1. Transitions

When an adverbial conjunction (also called a conjunctive adverb) appears in the middle of a sentence, it is separated off from the main sentence with commas.

- ➔ The Hollywood sign, **moreover**, does not include any of the original letters.
- ➔ Alice Cooper, **however**, donated money for the renovation in honor of Groucho Marx.

Adverbial conjunctions can also be used to connect two independent clauses when the adverbial conjunction is enclosed by a semi-colon and a comma. Since adverbial conjunctions function as both transitions and as compound sentence connectors, it is wise to always double check the punctuation that you use with an adverbial conjunction.

Adverbial conjunctions

Addition ➔ moreover, furthermore, likewise, finally, additionally, also, incidentally

Contrast ➔ however, nevertheless, in contrast, on the contrary, nonetheless, otherwise, on the other hand, in comparison, conversely, instead

Comparison ➔ similarly, likewise

Exemplification ➔ for example, for instance

Intensification ➔ indeed, in fact, moreover, still, certainly

Result ➔ therefore, thus, consequently, as a result, finally, then, accordingly, hence, subsequently, undoubtedly

Time ➔ meanwhile, then, next, finally, still, now

2. Interjections

A comma is used to mark or enclose a weak exclamation or interjection, separating it from the rest of the sentence. An interjection can come at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence.

- ➔ For **goodness sake**, the instruction book about traffic signs is over 20 pages long.
- ➔ The instruction book about traffic signs is over 20 pages long, **for goodness sake**.
- ➔ I do not understand, **for goodness sake**, why that book about traffic signs is so long.

3. Direct address

A comma is used to mark or enclose a noun phrase that is used as a direct address. When you use a noun phrase that names the person or persons being spoken to, you are using the form of a direct address.

- ➔ “**Sam**, did you see the billboard for *Terminator: Salvation*?”
- ➔ “Did you see the billboard for *Terminator: Salvation*, **Sam**?”
- ➔ “I thought the billboard for *Jumper* was good, **Sam**, but did you see the one for *Terminator: Salvation*?”

EXERCISE 4

Directions: Add commas where needed for transitions, interjections, direct address, or tag questions.

1. The writer uses many bulleted lists on the first page of his essay doesn't he?
2. A bullet granted is a typographical symbol that writers use to highlight a list of items.
3. A writer can however overuse bulleted lists; they should only be used sparingly and when absolutely necessary to organize information that may be difficult to process.
4. Bullets come in many shapes and sizes and are common in academic writing.
5. Chris do you use a lot of bullets in your essay writing?

4. Tag questions

Commas are also used to mark tags, which are added to the end of a sentence to question whether the statement that precedes the tag is accurate or not.

- The poster for *Sherlock Holmes* made the main character look somewhat dastardly, **didn't it?**
- It has been a long time since we have had a modern Sherlock Holmes, **hasn't it?**

15g

Set off quotations or dialogue

Commas are used to set off a speaker's words from the rest of the sentence.

- Chris complained, **"That book is over 20 pages long."**
- **"That book is over 20 pages long,"** Chris complained.
- **"That book,"** Chris complained, **"is over 20 pages long."**

Commas are not used with indirect quotations or speech.

- Chris complained that the book was too long.

Commas are not used after an exclamation point or question mark.

- "That book is too long!" complained Chris.
- "How long is that book on traffic signs?" asked Chris with a frown on his face.

15h

Set off geographic locations

Commas are used to set off items in an address or in the name of a place.

- Please send any comments about the new sign to Department of Signage, Box 50, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.
- Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is near Nashville.
- Be sure to check out the new sign at The Stone's River Mall, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

A comma is never used between the name of a state and a Zip Code.

- You should send your card and return postage to the Department of Signage, Box 50, Fairbanks, AK 99701.

15i**Set off dates**

Commas are used to set off items in a date. Use commas between the day and month, the date and year, and the year and the rest of the sentence.

- The smoking signs were changed on Monday, January 1, 2010, when the new law took effect.

A comma is never used between the date and month or the month and year when the date is written in inverted order.

- The smoking signs were changed on Monday, 1 January 2010, when the new law took effect.

A comma is never used when only the month and year are given.

- The smoking signs were changed in January 2010.

15j**Set off titles**

A comma is used to set off a person's title or degree.

- Dr. Watson had a sign outside his front door that said John H. Watson, M.D.
- Juliet Freestone, PhD, noted expert on Sherlock Holmes, will speak at the library today.

**Helpful
hint**

Commas are not always used for Jr., Sr., II, or III, which are considered part of someone's name. This rule is in flux; check with your instructor about his or her preference.

- Robert Downey, Jr. played Sherlock Holmes in the film by the same name.
- Robert Downey Jr. played Sherlock Holmes in the film by the same name.

15k**Set off numbers**

When numbers are longer than four digits, use commas to separate them, placing a comma every three numbers starting from the right.

- 1,000
- 1,000,000
- 1,000,000,000

Do not use commas in the above way when writing years, telephone numbers, street addresses, or zip codes.

15l**Prevent confusion**

Most grammar handbooks will tell you to use commas to prevent confusion or for clarity. These might be the kinds of examples shared with you.

- What Chris did, did affect all of us.
- It was the sign she had waited for, for years.

However, if you find yourself needing to use a comma to avoid confusion, you probably need to revise the entire sentence.

- What Chris did that day affected all of us.
- She had waited for years for the sign.