

Uses of the Comma

Prepared by Ann Humes

More than 80 percent of the punctuation marks used inside the sentence are commas. Hence it is important that you master using the comma if you are to guide your reader accurately along the trail of your thoughts. The rule that a writer uses commas to represent slight pauses is useful, but you should learn to apply the simple set of rules given below.

Commas are used in two ways.

Commas are used to separate.

Commas are used to enclose.

Use Commas to Separate

1. Use a comma to separate an introductory dependent clause from the main independent clause.
 - a. Although his listeners looked bored, he kept on talking.
 - b. Because it never gets cold, they wear few clothes.
 - c. Whenever she turns off the television, he becomes angry.
2. Use a comma to separate a long introductory phrase from the main clause.
 - a. Stopping often to gaze back, we ascend to the top.
 - b. The excitement being over, the students returned to the room.
 - c. In addition to the picture information it sends out, a TV station also transmits sound.
3. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses that you have joined with a coordinating conjunction.
 - a. Coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so

- b. He was tired, and he went home.
 - c. He was tired, yet he stayed.
 - d. He never arrived, so I went by myself.
 - e. She liked him, for a good man is hard to find.
 - f. Wear your coat, or you will catch cold.
4. Use commas to separate three or more words, three or more phrases, or three or more clauses when they are in a series.
- a. Men, women, and children enjoyed the dinner.
 - b. The boys stopped, looked, and then darted for cover.
 - c. She ordered fruit juice, coffee, cereal, pancakes, and eggs.
 - d. He soon developed a contempt for society, a dislike for tradition, and a total disregard for other people.
 - e. He learned to toss the javelin, to jump the hurdles, and to throw the discus.
 - f. She starts everyday telling herself that today is another holiday, that she will not kill herself with work, that every day is made for leisure.
5. Use commas to separate consecutive coordinate adjectives that precede the noun they modify. Adjectives are coordinate when each refers directly to the same noun. To find out if the adjectives are coordinate, place them after the noun in the following formula: _____ that was/were _____ and _____. Ex: The muddy tired discouraged men picked up their gear. Men that were muddy and tired and discouraged. That makes sense, so you would put commas in the sentence. Ex: The small summer cottage gleamed in the sun. Cottage that was small and summer.

- a. The muddy, tired, discouraged men picked up their gear. (commas needed)
 - b. The small summer cottage gleamed in the sun. (no commas needed)
6. Use commas to separate nouns in direct address, dialogue guides, exclamation, adverbs that modify the whole sentence, and words that respond.
- a. Nouns in direct address: Professor Holmes, your class is helpful.
 - b. Dialogue guides: John said, "What excuse can I give him?"
 - c. Exclamations: Oh, you will think of something to say!
 - d. Adverbs: Unfortunately, I have to stay up all night.
 - e. Words that respond: Yes, he assigned another essay.

Unnecessary Commas

1. Do not use a comma to separate a subject from its verb.
 - a. Incorrect: Even people with unlisted telephone numbers, receive crank calls.
 - b. Incorrect: Students who have attended small colleges, must adjust to large universities.
2. Do not use a comma to separate a verb from its object.
 - a. Incorrect: The man said, that the old tires were guaranteed.
 - b. Incorrect: I have noticed, that a person's appearance may influence his personality.
3. Do not use a comma between two words or phrases joined by "and."

- a. Incorrect: Primitive tools, and bits of pottery were found.
- b. Incorrect: She hit the boy, and ran to her house.

Avoid Comma Splices

If you join two sentences with a comma, you have spliced them together, just as you would splice two wires with tape.

The door was open. The canary flew out.

Incorrect: The door was open, the canary flew out.

Correct: The door was open; the canary flew out.

Correct: The door was open, and the canary flew out.

Use Commas to Enclose

1. Use commas on both sides to enclose single words that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

All institutions, therefore, may fail.

All of this, however, is theory.

My theory, unfortunately, was disproved.

2. Use commas on both sides to enclose phrases that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

She stood there, her damp face glowing, and asked us to be seated.

Mr. Smith, the foreman of the plant, was hurt.

Other animals, such as the giraffe, sleep standing up.

Maria's mother, of course, will be at the wedding.

3. Use commas on both sides to enclose clauses that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Brian Jackson, who has many hobbies, is a busy man.

4. Use commas on both sides to enclose dates and addresses.

March 17, 1957, is my mom's birthday.

He was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, and grew up in New York.

Comma Exercises

Using commas to separate a long introductory phrase from the main clause.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. Having been told of the test John wondered when he would study.
2. Wading into the cool lake we found relief from the heat.
3. In the heat of a summer afternoon our air conditioner stopped.
4. After our game with Central High School our bus broke down.
5. Seeing the oncoming car weaving I slowed down.
6. By the old bridge at the north of town we are meeting for a picnic.
7. At the last meeting of the cheerleaders Janie was elected captain.
8. Noticing the dark clouds we thought it would rain.
9. In the middle of our math class Tim became ill.
10. Being smaller than the other boys Jim did not make the team.

Using commas to separate an introductory clause from the main clause.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. When she noticed the time Marie realized she would be late.
2. As I entered the room I realized that I was late again.
3. While I worked at the restaurant I learned about food.
4. If she wishes Gloria can come with us.

5. Before you leave give us your address and telephone number.
6. Because the game was so one-sided we left early.
7. After he painted the office blue he dyed his hair green.
8. Since I left you my whole life has changed.
9. Although she loved her job it did not pay very much.
10. Whenever I go to the beach I become sunburned.

Using commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. He drove through Illinois Indiana and Kentucky.
2. He ran up the stairs through the door and down the hall.
3. He ends each day telling himself that the day was miserable that he should have stayed in bed that tomorrow will be better.
4. I ate breakfast read the paper and went to work.
5. I have seen his picture in magazines on television and in movies.
6. We went swimming boating and fishing.
7. Use care courtesy and common sense in your driving.
8. The boys stopped looked and then darted for cover.
9. He read *Hamlet Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*.
10. Running in place doing sit-ups and lifting weights are healthy activities.

Using commas to separate two independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. Your handwriting is sloppy but your punctuation is perfect.
2. The story was very interesting and she read it on one evening.
3. Alice wanted to stay home that evening yet she did not feel that she could refuse the invitation.
4. You can spend the money now or you can put it in the bank.
5. The day was overcast yet we went to the beach.
6. She threw the switch but the lights did not work.
7. Jean does not eat much lately and she is losing weight.
8. The rain continued for an hour so the game was called off.
9. He would not let them fight nor would he allow them to give up.
10. They would have to agree or they would not get anything.

Using commas to separate nouns in direct address, dialogue guides, exclamations, adverbs that modify the whole sentence, and words that respond.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. Jim are you sure that the building is safe.
2. Mrs. Winston your class has helped me.
3. Steve said "What do you want me to do?"
4. "Anything that you can do will be helpful" John replied.
5. Oh you will think of something to say.
6. I worried John that you had forgotten to feed the dog.
7. Unfortunately I have to stay up all night.

8. No you could go to bed early.
9. Yes he assigned another essay.
10. Mom please buy me some new shoes.

Using commas to separate coordinate adjectives

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. The instructor gave an unfair difficult examination.
2. The instructor gave a difficult final examination.
3. It was a happy productive prosperous season.
4. The foolish rude remark embarrassed him.
5. A heavy soiled ball sailed over the fence.
6. A tall dark and handsome man walked into the room.
7. Although it was a hot sticky miserable day, Mrs. Marston looked cool.
8. His long clean hair hung down to his worn faded jacket.
9. The short round brown bottle contains sulfuric acid.
10. Dangerous smelly fumes leaked from the bottle.

Using commas to enclose a single word that interrupts the flow of the sentence.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. It is however very difficult to hit a silverfish from then feet away.
2. He realized nevertheless that Martha would not let him keep a dog.
3. The umpire unfortunately called off the game.
4. Martha indeed hated homework.

5. The story nevertheless is interesting.

Using commas to enclose phrases that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. That song in my opinion is unimaginative.
2. Mike would be much improved on the contrary if he stayed in bed.
3. Mr. Barnes my dance instructor was a professional entertainer.
4. A Mazda the car with the rotary engine is expensive.
5. One of the car's safety features for example is the braking system.

Using commas to enclose clauses that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Directions: Punctuate the following sentences with commas.

1. I was very embarrassed when my husband who was only slightly drunk crashed down the stairs.
2. Gene Fowler who happens to be a poet is my best friend.
3. My car which I received as a gift sits idle in the driveway.
4. My friend who was hurt in the accident is in the hospital.
5. Dr. Rodriguez who was present as the scene called for an ambulance.