

Comma Do's and Don'ts

DO use a comma:

DON'T use a comma:

- ◆ With a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) that joins two independent clauses in a compound sentence. You must have a subject and verb on either side of the conjunction. *He said yes, and she said no.*
- ◆ After an introductory phrase or dependent clause that starts with a subordinating conjunction. *In the beginning, we had trouble with commas.*
- ◆ To set off transitional expressions, asides, conjunctive adverbs, contrasts, tag questions, etc. *The man, on the other hand, preferred bananas to apples.*
- ◆ To set off non-essential words, phrases and clauses, including parenthetical expressions and appositives. *The Clark Fork River, **which** runs through town, is both big and beautiful.* (**which**, versus “that,” usually means non-essential)
- ◆ Between words in a series (the last comma—the one before and—is optional). *We bought orange juice, toast and eggs for breakfast.*
- ◆ With adjectives you can switch around and put “and” between them (i.e. adjectives of equal importance). *The honey jar is round, yellow and big.*
- ◆ In numbers of more than four digits: *1,000 2,343 39,499*
- ◆ Between city and state, and after state. *I live in Missoula, Montana, near where the Clark Fork and Bitterroot rivers converge.*
- ◆ With dates and ages. *He was married on Nov. 26, 1989, and divorced a year later. Sherry Smith, 23, is a fabulous skater.*
- ◆ When you are directly addressing someone. *Elmer, will you fry me some eggs?*
- ◆ To introduce a full quotation—or between the full quotation and the attribution. *The man said, “You are wrong!” and “You need to listen to your mother,” said Mary’s father.*
- ◆ To punctuate letter openings and closings.
- ⊗ Just for the fun of it. You must have a good reason (i.e. one of the above rules).
- ⊗ Just because you think it sounds good. (Your middle-school teacher may have told you to use a comma every time you pause or take a breath — DON’T! Again, you need good reason to insert a comma.)
- ⊗ With cumulative adjectives (i.e. adjectives that are not of equal importance). *These postcards feature famous historical scenes.*
- ⊗ With essential clauses or phrases (also called restrictive) that are essential the meaning of the sentence. *Farmers trying to enhance crop growth use pesticides and fertilizers.* If you consider the phrase non-essential, then use commas. Notice, however, how this changes the meaning of the sentence. *Farmers, trying to enhance crop growth, use pesticides and fertilizers*
- ⊗ Before a subordinate clause that comes at the end of a sentence. *He appealed to voters because his economic plan would wave them money (no comma before “because!”).*
- ⊗ Before a partial quote. *Mae West told the guys to “come up and see me” sometime.*

