

Commas (Eight Basic Uses)

To better understand the use of the comma, begin by learning the following eight basic uses:

1. USE A COMMA TO SEPARATE INDEPENDENT CLAUSES.

Rule: Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, yet, so, or nor, for*) when it joins two complete ideas (independent clauses).

1. He walked down the street, and then he turned the corner.
2. You can go shopping with me, or you can go to a movie alone.

2. USE A COMMA AFTER AN INTRODUCTORY CLAUSE OR PHRASE.

Rule: Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase. A comma tells readers that the introductory clause or phrase has come to a close and that the main part of the sentence is about to begin.

1. When Evan was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.
2. Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, park rangers discovered a gold mine.

3. USE A COMMA BETWEEN ALL ITEMS IN A SERIES.

Rule: Use a comma to separate each item in a series; a series is a group of three or more items having the same function and form in a sentence.

1. We bought apples, peaches, and bananas today. (**series of words**)
2. Mary promised that she would be a good girl, that she would not bite her brother, and that she would not climb onto the television. (**series of clauses**)
3. The instructor looked through his briefcase, through his desk, and around the office for the lost grade book. (**series of phrases**)

4. USE COMMAS TO SET OFF NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES.

Rule: Use commas to enclose clauses not essential to the meaning of a sentence. These nonessential clauses are called nonrestrictive. Clauses which are essential are called restrictive. Both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses may begin with a relative pronoun (such as *who, whom, whose, that, which*). A relative pronoun refers to the noun or pronoun that precedes it.

1. Steven Strom, whose show you like, will host a party next week. (**nonrestrictive**)
2. John, who spent the last three days fishing, is back on the job again. (**nonrestrictive**)
3. The gentleman who is standing by the fireplace is a well-known composer. (**restrictive**)

5. USE A COMMA TO SET OFF APPOSITIVES.

Rule: An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun. Appositives offer nonessential information. Nonrestrictive appositives are set off with commas; restrictive appositives are not.

1. Alexander Pope, the Restoration poet, is famous for his monologues. **(appositive)**
2. The poet Pope is famous for his monologues. **(no appositive)**
3. The New York Jets, the underdogs, surprised everyone by winning the Super Bowl.
(appositive)

6. USE A COMMA TO INDICATE DIRECT ADDRESS.

Rule: When a speaker in a sentence names the person to whom he is speaking, this addressing of his audience is called direct address. Direct address is indicated by the use of a comma or commas, depending upon its placement within the sentence.

1. I think, John, you're wrong.
2. John, I think you're wrong.
3. I think you're wrong, John.

7. USE COMMAS TO SET OFF DIRECT QUOTATIONS.

Rule: A dialogue is a conversation between two or more people. If the speaker (not the listener) in the conversation is identified, his name, (or the noun or pronoun used to refer to the speaker), and the verb that refers to his speaking are enclosed within commas.

1. Mary said, "I dislike concerts because the music is too loud."
2. "I dislike concerts because the music is too loud," she said.
3. "I dislike concerts," proclaimed Mary, "because the music is too loud."

8. USE COMMAS WITH DATES, ADDRESSES, TITLES, AND NUMBERS.

Rules for dates: In dates, the year is set off from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.
Ex: On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.

Rules for addresses: The elements of an address or place name are separated by commas. A zip code, however, is not preceded by a comma.

Ex: John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.

Ex: Please send the letter to Greg Carvin at 708 Spring Street, Washington, IL 61571.

Rules for titles: If a title follows a name, separate the title from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.

Ex: Sandra Belinsky, MD, has been appointed to the board.

Rules for numbers: In numbers more than four digits long, use commas to separate the numbers into groups of three, starting from the right. In numbers four digits long, a comma is optional.

Ex: 3,500 [or 3500]

Ex: 100,000

Ex: 6,000,000

Exercise: Place commas where they belong in the following sentences.

1. Are you attending my graduation or are you visiting your aunt in Chicago?
2. Marty ate four pancakes two bacon strips and a bowl of grits.
3. The movie although Susan enjoyed it immensely left her in tears.
4. Simon Blake a well-known lawyer may run for governor.
5. If you ever need a ride Judy just let me know.
6. "I'll eat the eggs" said Jane "if you'll eat the bacon."
7. The winner of the contest will receive \$1000000.
8. Although the sky was cloudy no rain was in the forecast.

Homework

Edit the following paragraph, adding and deleting commas as needed. Refer to the eight comma rules you have learned and be sure you know why you are adding or deleting a comma.

With her mortarboard firmly on her head Tammy, took her place in the graduation procession which was held on May 12 2009. She told her mother Louisa that she wanted to be the first in the family to get a college degree which would also help her get a good job. In her mind either you could get a degree after high school or you could get a degree later but eventually everyone in the United States would need a college degree. When the chance came for her to go to college, and pay for most of it herself she decided it was a chance she could not afford to pass up. Each course she took in her ambitious undergraduate curriculum was another triumph for her. Another 15 weeks of reading staying up late at night writing studying and sitting at uncomfortable desks never scared Tammy. As she marched off the stage Tammy clutched the diploma in one hand, and hurled her mortarboard into the crowd with the other. She yelled “Yes! I made it!” When she got through the crowd and reached her family she screamed “Mom I did it!”