



WRITER'S STUDIO RESOURCES: COMMAS



What is a comma?

A comma is a punctuation mark that separates words, ideas, or phrases within a sentence. A comma is often thought to signify a pause, but where you pause or breathe in a sentence does not always accurately show where a comma should be placed.

Why would I use a comma?

Commas are used to divide or separate parts of a sentence in order to make the meaning clear and the sentence easier to read. Commas occur more frequently than any other mark of punctuation, which means it is vital you know how and when to use a comma.

How do I know when I need a comma?

When it comes to learning when and where a comma should be used, it can be a very intimidating task for many writers. Below are some of the more common guidelines and examples to help you get started.



Comma Rules and Examples

Rule 1: Commas with coordinating conjunctions (or FANBOYS)

The comma should be placed before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses into one sentence (an independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence). FANBOYS can help you remember the seven coordinating conjunctions which are *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*.

Ex: George wanted to go to the basketball game, but he had an English paper due the next morning.

Rule 2: Commas with introductory elements

A comma can also be used to separate the main clauses from introductory elements. The introductory phrase lets the reader understand that the main subject and verb come later. These introductory elements can include single words, short prepositional phrases, or longer dependent clauses.

Ex: Unfortunatley, the student overslept for his exam. (single word)

Ex: After the game, I celebrated the win with ice cream. (short prepositional phrase)

Ex: If you are going to the pool tomorrow, then you should pack sunscreen. (dependent clause)

Rule 3: Commas in a series

A series is a group of three or more items having the same purpose and form in a sentence. Basically, things in a list. A comma should be used to separate each item in a series.

Ex: For my birthday I got a new shirt, movie tickets, and a knuckle sandwich. (series of words)

Ex: The course evaluation said that the students had enjoyed that class, that they would recommend the class to others, and that they would be taking another course of the professor's. (series of clauses)

Ex: Sarah walked across campus, through the doors, and into the biology lab. (series of phrases)

Rule 4: Commas with nonrestrictive elements

Nonrestrictive clauses are nonessential clauses which are not needed to understand the meaning of the sentence. Clauses which are needed to understand the meaning of the sentence are known as restrictive. Commas are used to group the nonessential clauses from the rest of the sentence. Both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses can start with a relative pronoun (such as who, whom, whose, that, which), but not always.

Ex: Bob, who went the Ohio State Universtiy, is teaching biology again this semester.

This example is nonrestrictive because we do not need to know Bob attended Ohio State to understand that he is teaching biology again.

Ex: The lady who is standing by the front door is my mother.

This example is restrictive because we need "who is standing by the front door" to recognize which lady is that person's mother.

Rule 5: Commas with quotations

Commas provide separation between quoted elements and the rest of the sentence. The comma indicates to the reader that the quotation needs to be read with a different emphasis than the rest of the sentence. These commas serve us in two main ways: before quoted material and at the end of the quoted material that does not end the sentence.

Ex: Mia said, "I hope it doesn't rain when we go to the beach next week."

Ex: "The best shoe brands today," according to Tony, "are Converse and Nike."

Rule 6: Commas with coordinate adjectives

Coordinate adjectives are those that modify the same noun or noun substitute and can be flipped without changing the meaning of the sentence. Commas should be used to separate the coordinate adjectives.

Ex: Philip proved to be an efficient, cooperative student.

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