

Commas

(Adapted from *A Pocket Style Manual* by Diana Hacker)

The comma was invented to help readers. Without it, sentence parts can collide into one another unexpectedly, causing confusion.

Confusing: If you cook Elmer will do the dishes.

Confusing: While we were eating a rattlesnake approached our campsite.

Add commas in the logical places (after cook and eating), and suddenly all is clear. No longer is Elmer being cooked or the rattlesnake being eaten.

Various rules have evolved to prevent such confusion and to guide readers through complex grammatical structures.

Rule #1: Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (but, or, yet, for, and, nor, so) joining independent clauses.

Examples: We lost our oars, and that was the end of our boating.

I have a test tomorrow, but I haven't started to study.

I don't understand this problem, so I'll ask my instructor tomorrow.

They say they want to be friends, yet they have never called us.

Rule #2: Use a comma after an introductory word group.

Examples: When Irwin was ready to eat, his cat jumped onto the table.

Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, we discovered an abandoned shelter.

Excited about the move, Alice and Don began packing their books.

After we finish dinner, we'll go to a movie.

Rule #3: Use a comma between items in a series.

Examples: The stranger was tall, dark, and handsome.

My favorite colors are pink, blue, and green.

I'm taking English, history, psychology, and speech.

For breakfast the children ordered English muffins with peanut butter, French fries, and cherry Cokes.

Rule #4: Use a comma between coordinate adjectives (two or more adjectives that modify equally the same noun or pronoun). To determine if a comma is needed, see if **and** can be exchanged for the comma or

reverse the order of the adjectives. If these alternatives make sense, then a comma is needed.

Examples: Robert is a warm, gentle, affectionate father.
The dirty, rusty, dented car was an eyesore.
Spring evenings in the South are warm, sensuous experiences.
She was a faithful, dedicated friend.
Three large gray shapes moved slowly toward us.
(no comma needed)

Rule #5: Use a comma to set off a nonrestrictive element. A restrictive element restricts the meaning of the word it modifies and is therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence. It is **not** set off by commas. A nonrestrictive element describes a word whose meaning is already clear. It is not essential to the meaning of the sentence and **is** set off by commas.

Examples: For camp the children needed clothes that were washable. **(restrictive)**
For camp the children needed sturdy shoes, which were expensive. **(nonrestrictive)**

Rule #6: Use a comma to set off transitional and parenthetical expressions, absolute phrases, and contrasted elements.

transitional—a bridge between sentences or parts of sentences.

parenthetical—an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence.

absolute—a phrase that modifies the whole sentence

contrasted—sharp differences beginning with words such as not and unlike

Examples: Mike did not understand the assignment; therefore, he didn't complete it. **(transitional)**

Evolution, as far as we know, does not work this way. **(parenthetical)**

His tennis game at last perfected, Chris won the cup. **(absolute)**

Celia, unlike Robert, had no loathing for dance contests. **(contrasted)**

Rule #7: Use a comma to set off nouns of direct address, the words "yes" and "no," interrogative tags, and mild interjections.

Examples: Forgive us, Mary, for not including you.
Yes, the loan will probably be approved.
The film was faithful to the book, wasn't it?
Well, cases like this are difficult to decide.

Rule #8: Use a comma to set off direct quotations introduced with expressions such as she said.

Examples: Mary asked, "Are you going to the play?"
"We will go when the time is right," John replied.
President Bush announced, "We all need to work together."
As she was leaving she said, "I will be back in about an hour."

Rule #9: Use a comma with dates, addresses, and titles.

Examples: On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.
Greg lived at 708 Spring Street, Washington, Illinois 61571.
Sandra Barnes, M.D., performed the surgery.

Misuses of the Comma

- ✓ Do not use a comma between compound elements that are not independent clauses.
Example: The director led the cast members to their positions (no comma) and gave an inspiring last-minute pep talk.
- ✓ Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives (slinky, red, and silk).
Example: Joyce was wearing a slinky red silk gown.
- ✓ Do not use a comma to set off restrictive elements.
Example: Drivers (no comma) who think they own the road (no comma) make cycling a dangerous sport.
- ✓ Do not use a comma to separate a verb from its subject.
Example: Zoos large enough to give the animals freedom to roam (no comma) are becoming more popular.
- ✓ Do not use a comma after "such as" or "like."
Example: Plants such as (no comma) begonias and impatiens add color to a shady garden.
- ✓ Do not use a comma before than.

Example: Touring Crete was more thrilling for us (no comma) than visiting the Greek Islands frequented by the jet set.

✓ Do not use a comma before a parenthesis.

Example: At MCI Sylvia began at the bottom (no comma)(with only a cubicle and a swivel chair), but within five years she had been promoted to supervisor.

✓ Do not use a comma to set off an indirect quotation.

Example: Samuel Goldwyn once said (no comma) that a verbal contract isn't worth the paper on which it's written.

✓ Do not use a comma with a question mark or exclamation point.

Example: "Why don't you try it?" (no comma) she coaxed.