



COMMAS

One of the most intimidating grammar concepts for writers is correct comma usage. Saying “I thought there should be one” or “There seemed to be a pause” is not a good reason for using a comma. Properly used commas are important because they help the reader; without them, a reader would often have to backtrack and reread a sentence to find the writer’s meaning.

Actually, you need only six comma rules. Master these six rules, and your writing will be easier to read.

1. Put a comma before *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* when they connect two independent clauses. An independent clause stands alone as a sentence.

*We lost our oars, **and** that was the end of our boating.* (two sentences)

*We may leave Friday, **or** we may wait until Monday.* (two sentences)

I wanted to go but could not get my car started. (one sentence)

The last example does not have two independent clauses (it has just one subject and two verbs); therefore, no comma is necessary.

2. Put a comma between items in a series.

We ordered eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, and tomato juice for breakfast.

She ended the conference call, picked up her briefcase, and left.

- ▶ Adjectives in a series fall into two categories, coordinate and cumulative.

Coordinate adjectives modify the noun with equal weight and need commas:

The red, white, and blue flag fluttered in the breeze.

The fluffy, brown, angry cat hissed at me.

If the position of the adjectives could be moved and if the word *and* would fit naturally between them, you should probably use a comma.

Cumulative adjectives modify the noun so that the meaning builds and don’t need commas between them—even though they do make up a series:

The mayor wore a dark blue wool jacket.

The city demolished the dilapidated office building.

- ▶ If an address or date is used in a sentence, treat it as a series, putting a comma after every item, including the last.

He was born on May 17, 1959, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, and grew up there.

She lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico, for two years.

- ▶ When only the month and year are used in a date, the comma is usually omitted:

They moved to Michigan in May 1980.

3. Put a comma after an introductory expression that does not flow smoothly into the sentence. It may be a word, a group of words, or a dependent clause.

Yes, I'll go.

Well, that was the end of that.

Running down the hill, she slipped and fell.

When everyone had left, the auditorium was locked.

A dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence usually needs a comma after it. In the last example, you can see that a comma is necessary. Otherwise, the reader would read “*When everyone had left the auditorium . . .*” before realizing that was not the writer’s meaning. A comma makes the reading easier.

4. Put commas around the name of a person spoken to.

I think, Sylvia, that you are absolutely right.

Craig, how about a game of tennis?

Happy anniversary, Mom and Dad!

5. Put commas around an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence (such as *however, moreover, finally, therefore, of course, by the way, on the other hand, I am sure, I think*).

He thought, however, that I should wait.

I hope, of course, that they'll come.

We grabbed our plates, therefore, and got in the buffet line.

This should, I think, take only an hour.

Remember that some of the above words or phrases can be transitions, (however, moreover, therefore, etc.) often come between two independent clauses, and then require a semicolon in front of them.

He was busy; however, he took time to help.

It's an important meeting; therefore, I'm going.

6. Put commas around nonessential (extra or unnecessary) material.

Commas around nonessential phrases or clauses act like parentheses to bracket material that is not critical to the meaning of the sentence. The material may be interesting, but the main idea of the sentence would be clear without it.

- In this sentence

Gladys Nolan, who is heading the United Fund Drive, broke her ankle.

the clause *who is heading the United Fund Drive* is not essential to the main idea of the sentence. Without it, we still know exactly who the sentence is about and exactly what she did: Gladys Nolan broke her ankle. Therefore, the nonessential material is set off from the rest of the sentence by commas to show that it could be left out.

- But in this sentence

The woman who is heading the United Fund Drive broke her ankle.

the clause *who is heading the United Fund Drive* is essential to the main idea of the sentence. Without it, the sentence would read: The woman broke her ankle. We would have no idea which woman. The clause *who is heading the United Fund Drive* is essential because it tells us which woman. It could not be left out of the sentence. Therefore, commas are not used around it.

- In this sentence

The Grapes of Wrath, a novel by John Steinbeck, was a best seller.

the words *a novel by John Steinbeck* could be left out, and we would still know the main meaning of the sentence: The Grapes of Wrath was a best seller. Therefore, the nonessential material is set off by commas to show that it could be left out.

- But in this sentence

John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath was a best seller.

the title of the novel is essential. Without it, the sentence would read: *John Steinbeck's novel was a best seller.* We would have no idea which of John Steinbeck's novels was a best seller. Therefore, the title could not be left out, and commas are not used around it.

NOTE: *Comma rules are changing, and some commas that were once required can be omitted in certain circumstances. If you have doubts, consult a current grammar book or ask your instructor.*

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