

The Almighty and Useful Comma

Commas exist to help readers. They connect clauses and clarify meaning. What follows are some common situations in which commas are used.

Comma Before Coordinating Conjunctions that Join Independent Clauses

There are seven coordinating conjunctions: *and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, *nor*, *yet*, and *so*. Independent clauses can stand alone as complete sentences since they are complete statements that contain both a subject and a verb.

The sun rose well before we were awake, and the fog lifted high above the trees.

Her hobby is collecting stamps, but she doesn't like to display them.

Comma After an Introductory Element

These can be clauses, phrases, or single words followed by a comma that tells readers the introductory element has ended and the main part of the sentence is beginning.

Types of Introductory Elements:

Dependent Clauses

These clauses cannot stand alone as complete sentences. They often begin with *because*, *after*, or *although*.

Although I bought tickets to the Iron and Wine concert, I didn't go.

Introductory Words

Such words or word groups usually tell when, where, how, why, or under what conditions the main action of the sentence occurred.

Together, we will win the match.

Anxiously, Lisa waited for the agent to call.

Prepositional Phrases

These are phrases that begin with a preposition such as *at*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *to*, or *with* and generally end with a noun or a noun equivalent called the *object of the preposition*.

In all of my classes, I have to write a long paper.

Infinitive Phrases

These phrases usually are constructed around *to* with the base form of the verb (*to find*, *to speak*) and can act as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.

To find her apartment, I need to drive past the park.

Participial Phrases

These phrases, which always function as adjectives, usually come right before the noun or pronoun they modify.

Praised by all the critics, the movie still wasn't a hit.

Absolute Phrases

These are phrases that modify a whole clause or sentence, not just one word. They consist of a noun or noun equivalent usually followed by a participial phrase.

Her dream of being a cosmetologist destroyed, Sabrina decided to take up education.

Transitional Expressions

These expressions act as bridges between sentences or sentence parts. They include conjunctive adverbs like *however*, *therefore*, and *moreover* and transitional phrases like *for example*, *as a matter of fact*, and *in other words*. When used between independent clauses, they are preceded by a semicolon and usually followed by a comma.

However, Alsu does eat desserts.

First, Barry needs to sign the contract to begin his singing career.

Jamie doesn't respond well to homework; moreover, she struggles with deadlines.

Interjections

Mild interjections are followed by a comma.

Well, I should probably leave for class now.

Commas Set Off Nonrestrictive Elements

If a sentence has the same meaning when a modifier is removed, then it is a “nonrestrictive element” and needs to be set off with commas. A “restrictive element” defines the meaning of the word it modifies and is essential to the sentence. Since it contains crucial information, a restrictive element is not set off by commas.

Adjective Clauses

Adjective clauses are patterned like sentences. They contain subjects and verbs, but they function within sentences as modifiers of nouns or pronouns. They begin with a relative pronoun (*who, whom, whose, that, which*) or with a relative adverb (*where, when*).

Nonrestrictive: Joe, who sings all of the time, was unusually quiet this morning.

Restrictive: Joe is very happy when he is singing.

Appositives

These are nouns or noun phrases that rename a nearby noun. Nonrestrictive appositives are set off with commas; restrictive appositives are not.

Nonrestrictive: Kitty, a Southern woman, actually loves fried okra.

Restrictive: Gourmet chef Anita is always a favorite at dinner parties.

Commas Set Off Parenthetical Expressions and Elements of Contrast

Parenthetical expressions provide supplemental information that interrupts the flow of a sentence and/or appears at the end as an afterthought. Elements of contrast usually start with *not, never, and unlike* and are set off with commas.

Parenthetical: Loretta, however, will not tell us the name of her soon to be born baby.

Parenthetical: Erika, in fact, is a certified flight attendant.

Contrast: The newspaper mentioned that Daiva received a ticket, not where she received it.

Commas Can Tag Sentences and Signal Direct Addresses

Fern plays the clarinet, doesn't she?

Shannon, I still believe you can realize your dream of being a cosmetologist.

Commas are used in Lists and Between Coordinate Adjectives

When two or more adjectives each modify a noun separately, they are coordinate. When three or more items are listed in a series, those items should be separated by commas. While some choose to omit the commas between the last two items, beware that doing so may result in confusion.

Shauna owns a pair of black, yellow, and hot pink stiletto heels.

Joe wore the same clean, unironed shirt to Megan's birthday party.

Commas to Set Off Direct Quotations

Use commas to set off direct quotations with phrases like *he said* and *according to*.

According to Lisa, “blueberry yogurt is better than lemon.”

Allen Ginsberg said, “America, I've given you all and now I'm nothing.”

Commas are used with Numbers, Dates, Names, Places, and Addresses

Friday, March 13, 2009

I was married on December 12, 1987.

We were married in December 1987.

I grew up in Oakwood, Illinois.

An old lady on my street lives with 1,433 cats.