

Commas

Commas often confuse writers and for good reason! Rules governing comma usage vary depending on where and how the comma is used. Complicating this is the fact that sometimes comma usage is a stylistic rather than a grammatical choice. The following are the most common situations that call for commas and the corresponding rules and tips for comma usage:

1. LISTS

Rule: Use commas to separate three or more items in a list.

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Tip: The “Oxford comma” is the comma that comes before the final item in a list. Some style guides insist on the Oxford comma and some do not. When no usage is specified, the choice of whether or not to use the Oxford comma is left up to the writer.

However, in some cases, the Oxford comma is useful for avoiding confusion. For example:

I love my parents, Taylor Swift, and Draco Malfoy.
(Clearly a list of three things the author loves)

I love my parents, Taylor Swift and Draco Malfoy.
(Suggests the possibility that the author’s parents are Taylor Swift and Draco Malfoy)

Tip: For stylistic purposes, a comma may also replace “and” in a list of two items.

I packed light, bringing only my knife, my gun.

2. COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

Rule: Use commas when joining two independent clauses (complete sentences) with a coordinating conjunction (also known as FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.)

Leslie knew she was in trouble, but she didn’t want to admit it.

Tom was worried about his assignment, so he made an appointment at the writing center.

Tip: Coordinating conjunctions do not always join two *independent* clauses. When they join an independent and a dependent clause, then they do not need a comma. For more on the use of commas with coordinating conjunctions, see the “Coordinating Conjunctions” handout.

3. DIALOGUE AND DIRECT QUOTATIONS

Rule: When dialogue or a direct quotation is at the beginning of a sentence, use a comma before the closing quotation marks.

“All this happened, more or less,” writes Kurt Vonnegut at the beginning of Slaughterhouse-Five.

Rule: When the word right before a quote is a verb indicating who said or wrote it, use a comma to introduce the quotation.

At the beginning of Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut claims, “All this happened, more or less.”

Tip: When the original punctuation that ends a quote is a question or exclamation point, it should remain the same, even if it is at the end of the sentence.

“Look out!” she shouted.

In one of Shakespeare’s most famous soliloquies, Juliet asks, “What’s in a name?”

4. INTRODUCTORY WORDS AND PHRASES

Rule: Use a comma to separate an introductory phrase or dependent clause from the main part of a sentence.

During the hottest weeks of the summer, everyone left the city.

Meanwhile, Congress was fighting over where to put the capitol.

Tip: When the introductory element is very short, whether or not you use a comma is up to you.

First the bill has to pass in the House of Representatives.

After dinner they went back to her place.

Tip: When a prepositional phrase or dependent clause comes at the end of the sentence, there is no need for a comma:

Everyone left the city during the hottest weeks of the summer.

Tip: For more on dependent clauses, see the “Fragments and Run-Ons” handout.

5. ADDING INFORMATION

Rule: Enclose non-essential descriptors in commas.

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Tip: When the information being inserted is essential to the sentence’s meaning, commas should not be used. To tell if information is essential or non-essential, try reading the sentence without it.

The Revolutionary War hero Philip Schuyler had three daughters.

(“Philip Schuyler” specifies which war hero and is therefore essential information.)

The eldest sister, Angelica, was the most outgoing.

(There can only be one eldest sister in a family, so her name is non-essential information.)

Sometimes, whether the comma is necessary or not depends on contextual information.

Angelica’s sister Eliza married Alexander Hamilton.

(Angelica Schuyler had two younger sisters, so Eliza’s name is essential information.)

Tip: Sometimes non-essential information will include commas within it. When this happens, use dashes or parentheses to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

Philip’s daughters – Peggy, Angelica, and Eliza – were all powerful in their own ways.