**LANGUAGE ARTS 10  
COMMA RULES**

Commas…they save lives. Okay, maybe not literally but definitely figuratively. Comma errors are very common in papers. I’ll admit it; my first drafts don’t have comma perfection. So how come people mess up commas so much? In school we have been taught to put commas where we pause when we talk. This is good, because pauses can be a very good indicator of a need for a comma. Unfortunately, it’s not 100% accurate. In fact, I’m not sure if any grammar rule in English doesn’t have an exception. So let’s review comma rules and strategies for identifying where to put commas (and where not to put commas).

**When to Use Commas**

* After an introductory element
* Around a non-restrictive   
  (non-essential) phrase
* In lists
* Attributing quotations
* Between two or more coordinate adjectives
* With interrupters (appositives, interjections, etc.)

**When NOT to Use Commas**

* After a brief prepositional phrase   
  (single phrase less than five words)
* After a restrictive (essential) appositive phrase
* To separate the subject from the predicate

**Common Introductory Elements**

* Introductory/Transition Words
  + ex. Meanwhile, Still, However, Futhermore, Yes, No, etc…
* Prepositional Phrases
  + Phrases beginning with prepositions (ex. a, aboard, on, of, for, at, in, by, etc.)
* Participle Phrases
  + Particples (ex. verbs functioning as adjectives)
* Adverb Phrases
  + After, Although, As, Because, Before, If, Since, Though, Until, When, -ly, etc.
* Infinitive Phrases
  + Verbs in infinitive form (ex. “To be or not to be,”)

**Commas with compound sentences but NOT with compound sentence parts**

* Comma before a coordinating conjunction
  + FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So)
* Two independent clauses
  + That is…the clause containing the coordinating conjunction would be an independent clause if you deleted the conjunction (but then you’d use a semi-colon)
* Subject must either repeat or another one stated
  + ex. John went to the store, but Mary stayed home.
  + ex. Jacob won Dancing with the Stars, yet Derek had a higher score.

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| **Restrictive (essential) Clauses** | **Non-restrictive (non-essential) Clauses** |
| * Not set off by commas * A clause that restricts, limits, or specifies the noun or pronoun it modifies * Uses "that" instead of "which" (about a 99% rule) * Does take the pronoun “who” * Modify common nouns * Begin with the word “that” * Essential to meaning of sentence, and you cannot move the clause without changing the meaning of the sentence | * Set off by commas * Adds extra, parenthetical, non-defining information about the noun or pronoun it modifies * Uses "which" over "that" (about a 99% rule) * Does take the pronoun “who” * Modify proper nouns because specific names (definition of a proper noun) appear * Not essential to the meaning of the sentence, and you can move the clause without changing the meaning of the sentence. |
| Hero sentence:  My brother *that lives in Arizona* is named Pat. | Hero sentence:  My other brother, *who lives in Texas*, is named Sam. |
| Hero sentence explanation:  In this sentence the clause "that lives in Arizona" is needed to specify which brother, since the reader has no other way of knowing how many brothers the writer has or which brother is being referred to. | Hero sentence explanation:  In this sentence the noun phrase "My other brother," conveys the information that the writer has only two brothers, and it also specifies which of those two brothers is being referred to, so the fact that he lives in Texas is extra information--not necessary for specifying which of the two brothers is being referred to. |

**The Oxford Comma/Serial Comma**

USE IT. ALWAYS. Unless you really mean to join the last two things together as one thing.  
Remember: lists can be long because they are phrases or clauses and not just words.

**Interrupters Require Commas  
“Imma Let You Finish, But—”**

* Use commas to set off elements that interrupt a sentence
* Appositives and appositive phrases are usually set off by commas
  + These sort of look like non-restrictive (non-essential) phrases
  + **Appositive** = a noun or pronoun placed beside another noun or pronoun to identify or explain it.
  + **Appositive phrase** = an appositive and its modifiers
  + ex. Paul Szep, **the political cartoonist**, has won several Pulitzer Prizes.
* Restrictive appositives should not be set off by commas
  + These sort of look like restrictive (essential) phrases
  + **Restrictive appositive** = an appositive that is so closely related to the word or words near it that it really shouldn’t be set off by commas.
  + ex. The actor Joanne Woodward is married to Paul Newman.

**Quotations…where do you put that comma?**

* Put a comma after the attribution BEFORE a quote and before the attribution AFTER a quote:
  + ex. The coach said, “If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball.”
  + ex. The anchorman said, “I’m Ron Burgundy?”
  + ex. “I am having a bad day,” he said.
* When the attribution comes in the middle of a quote that is one sentence, you will use two commas start the second quote with a lower case letter.
  + ex. “Hi, I’m Rachel,” she said, “and I’m the new office assistant.”
* If the quote continues on but the first part was a complete sentence, you will use a period and capitalize the first letter of the next quote. If you don’t, you’ll create run-on sentences.
  + ex. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” the substitute said. “Ms. Davis is still sick.”
* When the comma or period comes at the end of the quote, it ALWAYS goes inside the quotation marks!
* Other punctuation such as semi-colons, colons, question marks, exclamation points can go either inside the quotation marks or outside, depending on the situation.

**Adjectives Need Commas Too!**

**Rule**: **Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.**

**Remember: Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.**

**What’s the difference between coordinate adjectives and non-coordinate adjectives?  
Coordinate adjectives are equal to one another. Non-coordinate adjectives are not.**

**How do you know if they are equal?   
Ask yourself these two questions. If you answer “yes” to both, then they are equal.**

* Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
* Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with *and* between them?

Examples

* He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)
* She often wore a gray wool shawl. (non-coordinate)

**Other uses for the Comma**

* Direct address
  + Jon, bring me that book.
* Addresses
  + Stoney Creek’s address is 575 E Tienken Rd Rochester, MI 48306.
* Numbers

**Resources:**   
Purdue OWL: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>  
*Grammar to Go  
Writer’s Inc.*

Blue, Tina. "Comma Usage: Restrictive vs. Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses." *Grammar and Usage for the Non-Expert*. N.p., 8 July 2005. Web. 27 Jan. 2013. <http://grammartips.homestead.com/nonrestrictivecommas.html>.