



School of Liberal Arts

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COMMA USAGE—A Few Basic Guidelines

Commas belong in places where they help join words or groups of words as in # 1 and # 3 below. They also belong where they separate introductory or parenthetical elements, as in # 2 and # 4 below.

1. Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining two independent clauses. (definitions: coordinating conjunction is *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*; independent clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a sentence)

Examples:

My teacher said to use parallel structure, **but** I didn't understand.

I studied hard for my exam, **so** I expect to get a good grade.

I did well in high school English, **and** my parents expect me to succeed in college.

2. Place a comma after groups of words that introduce the main part of the sentence.

Examples:

Although Jo studied the chapter on punctuation, she was still confused about commas. (subordinate clause)

Pacing up and down the corridor, I waited impatiently for my exam to be graded. (participial phrase)

With a fresh supply of paper and a pen, Bill sat down to write his final examination. (prepositional phrase)

3. In a series of three or more terms with a conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last. Although some sources say to omit the comma before *and*, it is best to include it to ensure clarity.

Examples:

I took my shirts, slacks, and dresses to the cleaner this morning. (three direct objects)

Lions, tigers, and bears appear in ads for the zoo. (three subjects)

4. Enclose parenthetical or interrupting expressions between commas.

Examples:

The book, **a study of Inuit art**, was impressive on the coffee table. (appositive)

Joe Hill, **who sits next to me in class**, is a good writer. (nonrestrictive relative clause)

The mechanic, **not the sales rep**, is the real expert on a car's performance. (negative appositive)

This new car, **according to the latest government reports**, rates high on stability. (participial phrase)

She will, **however**, be the best possible choice for the position. (interrupter)

5. By convention, use commas around the state name in an address given in text. Use commas also around the year when giving a date in text following the month/day/year sequence.

Examples:

The state capitol in Springfield, **Illinois**, is near the only home Lincoln ever owned.

December 10, **2001**, is the last day of classes this semester.

Notice, however, that there is no comma needed if you put the day before the month like this:

10 December 2001. This method of writing dates is gaining favor.

Please turn the page for some examples of when NOT to use commas.

WHEN NOT TO USE COMMAS

One unhelpful “rule” should not be used: place a comma where you pause (or breathe). This “rule” gets many writers in trouble since they pause at rhetorically important places that are not grammatically important. Kristin Woolever says it this way in Writing for the Technical Professions (New York: Longman, 1999):

Many sloppy writers have one rule for comma usage: “Place a comma anywhere you pause as you are reading the sentence.” Another equally false rule for commas is this one: “When in doubt, leave it out.”

1. Do not use a single comma between the subject and verb of your sentence.

Examples:

The professor of my Japanese class, gave a quiz yesterday. (comma between the subject *professor* and the verb *gave*—**incorrect**)

The professor of my Japanese class gave a quiz yesterday. (no comma—**correct**)

The professor of my Japanese class, who has never been a student in an American university, gave a quiz yesterday. (**pair of commas** around a parenthetical element, **correct**; see #4 on other side)

2. Do not use a comma immediately after a preposition.

Examples:

Jack and Jill went up, the hill. (comma between the preposition *up* and its object, *the hill*—**incorrect**)

Jack and Jill went up the hill. (no comma—**correct**)

On her trip to San Francisco, Janie plans to visit several landmarks, such as, the Golden Gate Bridge, Chinatown, and Fisherman’s Wharf. (*Such as* functions as a preposition—comma after *such as* is **incorrect**)

On her trip to Chicago, Mary plans to visit several landmarks, such as the Sears Tower, Navy Pier, and the Shedd Aquarium. (**correct**—no comma after *such as*; the comma before *such as* sets off the entire phrase which acts as an appositive)

3. Do not use a comma after *but* or *and* in a compound sentence.

Examples:

They went downtown but, they did not stay long. (comma after conjunction—**incorrect**)

They went downtown, but, they did not stay long. (commas around conjunction—**incorrect**)

They went downtown, but they did not stay long. (comma before conjunction but not after—**correct**)

4. Do not use a comma before *and* when it is joining two subjects, two objects, or two verbs.

Examples:

Peter, and Paul were early church leaders. (comma with just two subjects—**incorrect**)

Peter and Paul were early church leaders. (no comma—**correct**)

Sam went to the store to buy eggs, and milk. (comma with two objects—**incorrect**)

Sam went to the store to buy eggs and milk. (no comma—**correct**)

The members of the class moaned, and groaned about the assignment. (comma with compound verb—**incorrect**)

The members of the class moaned and groaned about the assignment. (no comma—**correct**)

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