

Writing Center Handouts

The Comma¹

Without proper comma use, an otherwise perfect sentence can lose most, if not all, of its meaning and impact. Though there are several rules and exceptions to comma usage, once you understand the basics, you can begin to navigate the special rules.

When are commas used?

- **Lists:** Commas in a list separate thoughts from one another and keep the sentence, and its intention, clear.

For example: “We went to the park with his brothers, Frank, and Jim.”

- With commas, it becomes clear that Frank and Jim were not the brothers being referred to, but additional information.
- Without commas, the number of people becomes unclear.

Some debate whether or not the comma before “and” in the previous example is necessary. If this “Oxford” or “serial” comma is removed, the sentence is still grammatically correct even though it loses clarity. In situations like this, review the sentence for clarity and make your own decision. If confusion persists, rearrange the sentence for clarity.

For example: “We went to the park with his brothers, Frank and Jim” may become

- “We went to the park with Frank, Jim and his brothers.”

- **Separate Clauses:** Commas are used to separate multiple clauses in a sentence from one another
 - The comma depends on the presence of more than one independent clause.
 - An **independent clause** is a complete thought with a subject and a predicate:
 - “Mary went to the store.”
 - “She bought some eggs.”

When the two independent clauses are combined and separated by a conjunction (and, or, but, so), a comma must separate them.

- “Mary went to the store, and she bought some eggs.”

If there is no conjunction, then a semicolon must be used.

- “Mary went to the store; she bought some eggs.”

- Omit the comma when dependent clauses attach to independent clauses.

¹ Adapted from: (refer to for additional help)

- A **dependent clause** has no subject and cannot stand alone
- The dependent clause borrows the subject from the independent. When this is applied to the previous sentence, it becomes:
 - “Mary went to the store and bought some eggs.”
- **Parenthetical Phrase:** Parenthetical phrases are those that are not crucial to the meaning of the sentence but may add clarity.
 - Parenthetical phrases are inserted into the sentence, and thus must be set off with commas.
- *For example:*
 - “Once upon a time, there was a fair maiden.”
 - “People, due occasionally to boredom, tend to distract easily.”
 - “Tim, ignoring the obvious stares, kept talking.”
 - “Her eyes drooping, Lisa forced herself awake.”
 - “Apples, Hank, cannot be blue.”
- Most of the time, these phrases can be taken out of the sentence, and though the sentences may lose their impact or context, they would not be incorrect.
- However, without commas, they would make no sense.
- **Between Adjectives:** Just as commas are used to separate details in lists, they must also be used to separate adjectives in descriptions.
 - **Coordinate Adjectives:** Coordinate adjectives both describe the noun.

For example: “It was a dark, stormy night.”

“Dark” and “stormy” are separated by a comma because they both describe “night.”

- However, **Cumulative Adjectives** are the first in a series in which the first adjective describes the second and the noun, so the comma is absent.

For example: “He had a bright red backpack.”

“Bright”, in this case, describes “red backpack” and does not need to be separated by a comma. If bright were referring to the state of the backpack, then the two adjectives would be separated by a comma.

These commas rules are simple, general guidelines, and differing style guides require different rules. As always, check for your professor’s preference.