

Conquering the Comma

Even experienced writers have difficulty with (and disagreements about) comma use. Comma use can be confusing because of what the mark represents: a pause. Some of you may have even heard the common edict for using commas, “every time you take a breath or a pause.” Although this is not always true, there is some basis behind the assertion. With speech, we often pause within or between thoughts to emphasize or clarify a point. With writing, we should use the same technique, using commas to mark these points.

Punctuation in writing serves as a signpost of sorts, directing the reader to what is ahead and indicating how the words and phrases and clauses of the sentence are to be interpreted in relation to each other.

Here are 7 simple rules to help you better understand comma use as a tool to improving your own writing.

1. Between Clauses Connected by Conjunctions

Subordinating Conjunctions such as *although*, *because*, *if*, *until*, and *when*, and Coordinating Conjunctions such as *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so* (*fanboys*), are often used to connect clauses to create complex and compound sentences. (*Please refer to the Subordination and Coordination Handout for more information on these parts of speech and how they are used*).

A comma is often used to indicate a pause between these clauses as shown in the following examples:

With Subordination

If I pay for the movie, you should pay for dinner.
Although the ice cream was on sale, we decided to get popcorn.
When I get back, we can go to the mall.

With Coordination

The movie was good, *but* the book was better.
I followed Mom’s recipe exactly, *yet* the cookies just weren’t the same.
You are welcome to come with us, *or* you can stay home.

2. To Separate Items in a Series

Commas are used to separate three or more items (words or phrases) in a series. When only two items are connected by *and*, *or*, or *but*, no comma is needed:

Words in a Series

Jordan spends her summer days *swimming*, *sailing*, *sunbathing*, or *sleeping*.

Phrases in a Series

In the fall, *in the winter*, and *in the spring*, however, Jordan’s schoolwork leaves her little time for these activities.

3. To Set Off Introductory Material

Often the main portion of a sentence is introduced by a word, phrase, or clause that indicates a time, place or condition. Introductory material often consists of a prepositional phrase (expressing a relation to another word or element) or a verb phrase (verbal) that should be set off by a comma. (*Please refer to other handouts for more information on Prepositional and Verb Phrases*).

In these examples, you will see that the main clause, following the comma, is able to “stand alone” as a complete sentence. This is a good trick to identifying if you have placed the comma in the correct position:

Prepositional Phrase

Over a period of several years, I grew to understand the importance of a good education.
In a matter of minutes, we were flying at 35,000 feet.

Verb Phrase

Running through the door, my sister announced she had been accepted to graduate school.
Yelling and splashing frantically, Courtney drifted away from shore.

Occasionally, you will see a word or brief phrase to introduce a sentence. Use a comma to set off these introductory elements to emphasize or clarify the main point of the sentence:

Finally, I would like to suggest we offer a moment of silence for our fallen comrades.
Soon after, the meeting was interrupted by a strange noise.

4. To Set Off Elements That Interrupt Sentence Flow

Often commas are used within a sentence to surround a word, phrase, or clause that interrupts the flow of the sentence. For instance, when a word adds emphasis, provides transition, or renames or illustrates another word in the sentence (as an appositive), use commas as shown in the following examples.

NOTE: In these examples, you might notice what we refer to as “non-restrictive elements.” That is, clauses or phrases that could be left out of the sentence without altering its basic meaning. Test your comma use by covering the “interrupter” word or phrase (in **bold** here) and checking to see if what remains expresses a complete thought:

Emphasis

This school, **as a matter of fact**, is one of the best in the nation.
Your chocolate chip cookies, **I must say**, are the best I have ever had.

Transition

The rest of the class, **however**, performed well enough to win the game.
John, **on the other hand**, was not invited to the reunion.

Appositive

Their son, **who just turned four**, is adjusting well to the new classroom.
My professor, Dr. Rothstein, just published a book about the pyramids of ancient Egypt.

5. To Set Off Direct Quotations

Often writers will need to *quote* sources, to write down word for word what other people say. The format for doing this is to set off quoted material with quotation marks to tell the reader that these words are not our own. Commas are also necessary for helping to distinguish between your own words and attributions (*he said*, for example) and the words of the person being quoted (*For more formation on the specifics of proper quoting techniques, please refer to the “Introducing Quotes” handout*).

These are generally three formats for incorporating direct quotations as seen in the following examples:

Leading With an Attribution

According to Dr. Wallace, “the prevalence of cancerous agents has increased by 67% in the last ten years.”

Ending With an Attribution

“The prevalence of cancerous agents has increased by 67% in the last ten years,” *according to Dr. Wallace*.

Interrupting With an Attribution

“The prevalence of cancerous agents,” *according to Dr. Wallace*, “has increased by 67% in the last ten years.”

6. To Set Off Nouns of Direct Address

We often use a person's name when speaking directly to him or her. This is called a noun of direct address. Since the person's name is an additional component to the main idea or directive of the sentence, it must be separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma. Therefore, always use commas before and after the names of people you are talking to. When this rule is ignored, the meaning of the sentence may change unintentionally as shown in the following examples:

At the Beginning of a Sentence

Mr. Brown is the problem right in front of our eyes? (Mr. Brown might be offended by this statement)
or
Mr. Brown, is the problem right in front of our eyes? (This form clearly identifies the question)

At the End of a Sentence

Let's eat Grandma! (although Grandma may be tasty, this is likely not what you mean)
or
Let's eat, Grandma! (this form indicates that you are speaking directly to Grandma)

In the Middle of a Sentence

Take this young man and leave the store immediately. (You might question the intent of this statement)
or
Take this, young man, and leave the store immediately. (This form clarifies the intent of the statement)

7. Other Situations That Call for Commas

In addition to the previously mentioned situations, remember to use a comma to

Set Off the Salutation of a Personal Letter (not a business letter)

Dear Mr. Matthews,

or

Hello, Mr. Matthews.

or

Hello Mr. Matthews, (although this is not technically correct, it is becoming widely acceptable)

Set Off the Parts of Dates From the Rest of a Sentence

December 7, 1941, is a day that will live in infamy.

or

Michael was born at 10:03 on August 5, 1975.

or

Today, November 9, 2012, is the day this handout was created.

Set Off the Parts of Addresses in a Sentence

His last known address is 265 Sunderland Road, Worcester, MA 01604.

Indicate Thousands Within Numbers

There are 2,870 seniors in this year's graduating class.

or

Over 6,000,000 Jewish citizens were killed during the Holocaust.