

Comma Rules

There are basically 5 chief reasons to use commas:

SEPARATION OF ELEMENTS

1. To separate words in a series (Strunk & White Rule #2).

Ex: *We went to the store and bought **apples, bananas, and peaches.***

2. In a host of conventional ways, such as to separate dates, addresses, and places.

Ex: *On **February 12, 1989**, I turned twenty-one. We moved to **Spartanburg, South Carolina**, when I was thirteen. Send the groceries to 1500 North Plaza Street, Pal Alto, California, 90825.*

ALONG WITH COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

3. To join independent clauses linked with a coordinating conjunction (examples: and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet). (S&W #4).

Ex: *We went to the **store**, **and** we bought a bunch of bananas.*

Exceptions:

a) The comma may be omitted if the phrases are very short. This is very rare, though.

Ex: *It rained and I wept.*

Notes:

a) Do not join independent clauses **without** a conjunction. Use a semicolon instead. (Strunk & White Rule #5)

Ex: *We went to the **store**; **we** bought a bunch of bananas.*

HOWEVER, if the two phrases are very short, a comma may be preferable. This should be done very rarely, though. (S&W #5)

Ex: *Here today, gone tomorrow.*

b) If two independent clauses are joined by a transitional adverb (however, besides, accordingly, therefore, thus, etc.) and not by a coordinating conjunction, then a semicolon should be used, not a colon. (S&W #5)

Ex: *I have never been to the Publix store; **however**, I have heard good things about it.*

c) If two independent clauses have the same subject, use a comma if they are joined by a “but,” but not by an “and.” (S&W #4)

Ex: *I made it to the store, **but** did not find what I was looking for.*

*I went to the store **and** bought some chips.*

d) You do not need a comma if two clauses are joined by a subordinating conjunction (while, where, because, since, before, unless, after, although, as, because, if, etc). In this case, one clause is independent while the other is dependent.

Ex: *I was about to fall asleep **when there was a knock on the door.***

*Can you pick up some lunchmeat **if you stop by the store?***

HOWEVER, a comma may occasionally be used if the dependent clause is long or meant as more of an aside.

Ex: *I was going to go to nap, **that is unless you need me to fix supper.***

MARKING OFF INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

4. After transitional adverbs (S&W #5).

Ex: *I had planned on going to the store; **however**, my car broke down on the way.*

5. After other introductory phrases, clauses, or elements.

Ex: ***After I went to the store**, I went home.*

***Heading out the door**, I grabbed my keys.*

***Although I hated going to the store**, I knew that we needed milk at home.*

***After paying all my bills**, I still had money for groceries.*

***Yes**, I did have time to stop by for milk.*

***My dear**, you are driving way too fast.*

Exceptions:

a) If the introductory phrase is a short prepositional phrase, the comma can sometimes be omitted.

Ex: ***After Friday** I will have all the time I need to do the shopping.*

MARKING OFF NONESSENTIAL INFORMATION

6. To set off parenthetical expressions, which are phrases or words said as an aside and which do not add tremendously to the meaning of the main clause.

Ex: *When you go to the store, **that is if you don't mind**, please pick up some peaches.*

*Well, **Susan**, can you tell me why you didn't remember to pick up the jelly.*

*She did, **nevertheless**, have time to stop for gas.*

Exceptions:

a) If the parenthetical expression is a single word and if the interruption to the flow of the sentence is only slight, you may omit the commas. (S&W #3)

Ex: *I know the most direct way to the get to the store is to take Main St.; I prefer **however** to take Broadway Avenue to miss all the lights.*

7. To set off nonrestrictive clauses or phrases, both of which add descriptive information but are not essential for the meaning of the sentence.

Ex: *My cousin, **who is coming to the party tonight**, will bring chips with him.*

*My wife, **once employed by Uncle Joe's Groceries**, will never shop there again.*

*Joann, **moving imperceptibly among the guests**, listened to the various conversations in the room in an effort to sense the party's mood.*

Notes:

a) If a clause is restrictive, which means that it is essential to the meaning of the sentence, then it should not be surrounded by commas.

Ex: *The peaches **which are too ripe** will be sent to the factory.*

*The dog **with the white spots** stole my last cookie and gobbled it down.*

*Yes, that dog **running down the street without a collar** is mine*

b) If the nonrestrictive clause is long, uses commas, or represents an extremely abrupt break or interruption in the thought, then you may prefer to use a dash (or double-hyphen [--] if typing) to set this clause off.

The same goes for parenthetical expressions (#5 above) or appositive phrases (#7 below). (S&W #8)

Ex: *His first thought upon getting out of bed – **if he had one at all** – was to get coffee.*

*Three planets – **Venus, Mars, and Jupiter** – can usually be seen in the night sky.*

8. Similarly, to set off appositive phrases, which are noun phrases that describe or provide information about the previous noun.

Ex: *Jane, **my next-door neighbor**, always had her groceries delivered.*

*Monticello, **a small town in central Illinois**, only has two grocery stores.*

9. Also, to set off absolute phrases, which are phrases that stand grammatically independent and have no identifiable grammatical link to the rest of the sentence.

Ex: ***All things being equal**, tomorrow will be our big day.*

***Considering how much I spent on junk food last month**, I should probably cut back.*

***The last item having been placed in my bag**, I picked up my groceries and left for home.*

CLARIFICATION

10. To clarify confusing or ambiguous sentences.

Ex: *After **Friday, afternoon classes** will be cancelled (instead of "After Friday afternoon classes will be cancelled.)*