

# FUN WITH COMMAS: A COMMA USAGE GUIDE

## WHEN DO YOU NEED A COMMA?

### 1. IN A COMPOUND SENTENCE AFTER A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

When joining two or more independent clauses (complete thoughts) with a coordinating conjunction, place a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

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COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS ARE WORDS THAT ARE USED TO LINK GRAMMATICALLY SIMILAR ELEMENTS LIKE TWO NOUNS (PEACE AND JOY), TWO ADJECTIVES (LOUD AND SCARY) OR TWO CLAUSES.

**FANBOYS** is an acronym that can help you remember the seven coordinating conjunctions: **For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So.**

If the words on both sides of the coordinating conjunction could be a separate sentence, add a comma before the conjunction. If they cannot, do not add a comma.

Comma needed

- **I would have been happy to help her, but I was mortally wounded.**
- **I love you, but your feet are too big.**
- **Her heart was full of bile, and her mouth was full of lies.**

No comma needed

- **He went to heaven but couldn't afford the entrance fee.**

### 2. BETWEEN ITEMS IN A SERIES

Use commas to separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

Comma needed

- **She registered for physics, defense against the dark arts, and rocket science.**

- **George planned to take over the earth, sell the planet to the highest bidder, and use the profits to start a goat farm on Neptune.**

No comma needed

- **Lana was logical and lovely.**

### 3. AFTER INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES

Add a comma after introductory clauses.

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INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES ARE DEPENDENT CLAUSES THAT SET THE STAGE FOR THE MAIN PART OF THE SENTENCE, THE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE. INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES START WITH ADVERBS SUCH AS AFTER, ALTHOUGH, AS, BECAUSE, BEFORE, IF, SINCE, THOUGH, UNTIL, & WHEN

Comma needed:

- **Although Simon proposed, he did not come to the wedding.**
- **If Rashia had asked, he would have given his life.**
- **Because the war had ended, the soldiers buried their guns.**

## 4. AFTER INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

Like introductory clauses, introductory phrases are dependent and set the stage for the main sentence. Unlike introductory clauses, they do not include a subject and verb. Introductory phrases include PREPOSITIONAL, INFINITIVE, ABSOLUTE, and PARTICIPIAL PHRASES.

### PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

AN INTRODUCTORY PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE ANSWERS ONE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MAIN CLAUSE: HOW? WHERE? WHICH ONE? WHAT KIND? WHEN? TO WHAT EXTENT? IF THE PHRASE IS FOUR OR MORE WORDS, USE A COMMA.

Comma needed:

- **Along roadsides across the country, ghosts wander looking for homes.**

No comma needed:

- **On the train they lost their minds.**

### APPOSITIVE PHRASES

AN INTRODUCTORY APPOSITIVE PHRASE RENAMES THE NOUN DIRECTLY AFTER IT.

Comma needed:

- **A time traveler with a grudge and a love of glam metal, Jack kept returning to 1978.**

### INFINITIVE PHRASES

AN INTRODUCTORY INFINITIVE PHRASE STARTS WITH AN INFINITIVE [TO + SIMPLE FORM OF A VERB].

Comma needed:

- **To avoid answering their questions, she pretended to be dead.**

### ABSOLUTE PHRASES

AN INTRODUCTORY ABSOLUTE PHRASE CONSISTS OF A NOUN FOLLOWED BY A WORD OR PHRASE THAT DESCRIBES THE NOUN AND MODIFIES AN ENTIRE CLAUSE.

Comma needed:

- **Their hands and faces bloody, the children were not allowed at the table.**

### PARTICIPIAL PHRASES

AN INTRODUCTORY PARTICIPLE DESCRIBES A NOUN OR PRONOUN IN THE MAIN CLAUSE IN TERMS OF ITS ACTION OR STATE OF BEING. PARTICIPLES GENERALLY END IN -ED, -ING OR -EN. WHEN A SENTENCE STARTS WITH A PARTICIPAL PHRASE, USE A COMMA AFTER IT. IF THE PARTICIPIAL PHRASE IS ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE, NO COMMAS SHOULD BE USED.

Comma needed:

- **Examining the wound carefully, he decided to use the hack saw.**
- **Shaken and haunted, James asked to be given a second chance.**

No comma needed:

- **Going for a swim in the sewers always made her feel better.**

## 5. AROUND ADJECTIVE CLAUSES

ADJECTIVE CLAUSES DESCRIBE THE NOUN THAT COMES BEFORE THE CLAUSE. THEY BEGIN WITH *THAT*, *WHEN*, *WHERE*, *WHO*, *WHOM*, *WHOSE*, *WHICH*, OR *WHY*. IF THE ADJECTIVE CLAUSE CAN BE REMOVED WITHOUT CHANGING THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE, PLACE COMMAS ON BOTH SIDES OF IT.

Comma needed

- **The president, who was recently arrested, has no moral intelligence.**
- **Super Stupor, which is the largest bar in town, lost its license.**

No comma needed

- **The crematorium that I liked recently closed.**

## 6. AROUND APPOSITIVES

AN APPOSITIVE IS A WORD OR PHRASE THAT DESCRIBES AND RENAMES A NOUN RIGHT NEXT TO IT. WHEN THE APPOSITIVE IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE, SET IT OFF WITH A COMMA OR, IF IT IS MIDSSENTENCE, TWO.

Comma needed:

- **Akron Splendif, the director of the new organ procurement agency, just received a third kidney.**

## 7. IN DATES

COMMAS ARE USED TO SEPARATE THE DAY OF THE WEEK FROM THE MONTH AND THE DAY OF THE MONTH FROM THE YEAR.

WHEN A DATE APPEARS IN THE MIDDLE OF A SENTENCE, THE YEAR IS ALSO FOLLOWED BY A COMMA.

Comma needed:

- **She realized he had scheduled the wedding for Friday, March 13th, 2026.**
- **He noticed that the love letter was dated April 1, 1999.**
- **The storm on November 11, 2011, was considered the beginning of the end.**

## 8. AFTER INTRODUCTORY WORDS

INTRODUCTORY WORDS FUNCTION AS BRIDGES THAT HELP READERS TRANSITION FROM ONE SENTENCE TO THE NEXT. INTRODUCTORY WORDS SHOULD BE FOLLOWED BY A COMMA.

Common introductory words:

- **yes, however, well, meanwhile, nonetheless, furthermore, therefore, thus, moreover, afterward, later, first, finally, generally, still, yet, next, basically, no, actually, eventually, now, ultimately, etc.**

## 9. TO SET OFF QUOTATION MARKS IN DIALOGUE

USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE THE WORDS INSIDE QUOTATION MARKS FROM THE REST OF THE SENTENCE. IF A DIALOGUE TAG COMES BEFORE THE QUOTED MATERIAL, PLACE THE COMMA AFTER THE TAG AND BEFORE THE QUOTE. IF THE DIALOGUE TAG COMES AFTER THE QUOTED MATERIAL, PLACE THE COMMA BEFORE THE CLOSING QUOTATION MARK.

Comma needed:

- **Elena whispered, "Did you do it?"**
- **"Excuse me," said Richard. "You just cut off my finger."**
- **"Oh! I'm so sorry," I shouted, "I didn't see you there."**

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## 10. WHEN NAMING GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

COMMAS ARE USED TO SEPARATE GEOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS. WHEN A SERIES OF GEOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS APPEARS IN THE MIDDLE OF A SENTENCE, THEY ARE FOLLOWED BY A COMMA.

Commas needed:

- **His address was 123 Sesame Street, New York, NY 54321.**
- **They left Paris, France, to live in Paris, Texas, because they thought the Eiffel Tower in Paris was showy.**

## 11. WHEN USING NAMES

WHEN DIRECTLY ADDRESSING SOMEONE, THE PERSON'S NAME SHOULD BE SET OFF WITH COMMAS.

Comma needed:

- **John, I want you to come look at this.**
- **Unfortunately, Mary, I've temporarily lost my vision.**

COMMAS ALSO SET OFF NAMES IN GREETINGS AND CLOSINGS OF LETTERS AND EMAILS:

Comma needed:

- **Greetings, Boris,**
- **Yours till I find someone better, Matilda**

## 12. WITH THE WORDS YES AND NO

IN DIRECT ADDRESS, USE A COMMA AFTER THE WORDS YES AND NO.

Comma needed:

- **No, I did not intend to destroy him.**
- **Yes, you can pick up the zombies on Friday.**

## 13. AROUND INTERRUPTORS

INTERRUPTERS INTERRUPT A THOUGHT TO SHOW EMOTION OR ADD EMPHASIS. WHEN YOU USE AN INTERRUPTER IN THE MIDDLE OF A SENTENCE, PLACE A COMMA ON BOTH SIDES.

Comma needed:

- **Teleportation fees, as you know, are projected to fall by thirty percent.**
- **The children, unfortunately, were taken by aliens.**
- **The closet was, in fact, a pocket dimension.**

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Questions? Corrections? Suggestions? Complaints? Contact Danielle at [ddel-giudice@mvcc.edu](mailto:ddel-giudice@mvcc.edu).