Comma Conundrums: When They Clarify, When They Confuse

Commas help you to communicate to your reader when specific words or ideas should be linked together and when they should be considered separately. The break between two thoughts separated by a comma is not as strong as those separated by a period or a semi-colon; it is only a slight mental pause. Putting a comma where it doesn’t belong creates an unintended break in meaning; using a comma where a period or semi-colon should be used ties ideas together too closely.

Beware of popular myths of comma usage:

**MYTH**: Long sentences need a comma. A really long sentence may be perfectly correct without commas. The length of a sentence does not determine whether you need a comma.

**MYTH**: You should add a comma wherever you pause. Where you pause or breathe in a sentence does not reliably indicate where a comma belongs. Different readers pause or breathe in different places.

**MYTH**: Commas are so mysterious that it’s impossible to figure out where they belong! Some rules are flexible, but most of the time, commas belong in very predictable places. You can learn to identify many of those places by using the tips in this handout.

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### Basic Rules for Comma Use

1. **Use commas to separate words, phrases, or clauses in a series.**
   
   The words can be nouns, adjectives, or verbs.

   - The secret recipe for the superdelicious drink I invented includes vodka, grapefruit juice, raspberries, a splash of rye, and ketchup.
   - The dog ran through the park, grabbed the Frisbee from the boy, and jumped in the lake.
   - That small, dark closet definitely houses vampires.
   - We came, we saw, we ate, and we left.

   All of these examples use the **serial comma**, which means they include a comma before the last item in the series. Sometimes the serial comma is absent in magazines and newspapers, but it is generally a good idea to use it in formal writing. It often helps to clarify the relationship between the items in a series, too. For example, consider this book dedication:

   - To my parents, the Pope and Mother Teresa

   (Is it dedicated to these three people? Or are the parents of the author the Pope and Mother Teresa? Imagine the scandal!)

2. **Use commas to separate adjectives in a series if you could replace the comma with “and.”**

   - The healthy, delicious food available on this campus reflects well on the school’s interest in student health and well-being.
   - The seven senior girls live in a giant three-story house. (no comma because you wouldn’t say “giant and three-story house” or “seven and senior girls”)

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3. Use commas before coordinating conjunctions that join two independent clauses.
   There are two key points:
   A) Never put a comma after a coordinating conjunction—only before. (FANBOYS is a handy mnemonic device for remembering the coordinating conjunctions: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.)

   Yes: I went to see Samantha perform in the school play, but she did not return the favor by coming to my recital.
   No: Samantha claimed that she got lost on the way, but, I know that she actually went to the movies that afternoon.

   B) The clauses separated by commas should be independent: they should each be able to stand alone as sentences.

   Yes: Elephants may never forget what they know, but how much do they really know to begin with?
   No: Mark went to the bank, and took out some money to lend me.

If you don’t have FANBOYS between the two complete and separate thoughts, using a comma alone causes a “comma splice” or “fused sentence” (some instructors may call it a run-on). Some readers (especially professors) will consider this a serious error.

4. Use commas to set off introductory elements, especially if they are long.
   An introductory element is a word or phrase that precedes the main subject-verb sentence. Here are several examples:

   • First, I will argue that men are more closely related to dinosaurs than women. After that argument has been made, I will move into a broader discussion of reptiles.
   • A fierce academic debater, Dr. Atticus was surprised when she was unable to persuade her husband to do the dishes.

   What’s wrong with this one?
   After retiring my wife, my parents, our neighbors, and I plan to travel across the country.

5. Use commas to set off non-essential elements of the sentence.

   • My niece, wearing a yellow jumpsuit, is playing in the living room.
   • The Green party candidate, who had the least money, lost the election.
   • Professor Benson, grinning from ear to ear, announced that the exam would be tomorrow.
   • Tom, the captain of the team, was injured in the game.
   • She was, however, too tired to make the trip.

Do not use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with that (relative clauses). That clauses after nouns are (usually) essential. That clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential.

   That clauses after nouns:

   • The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.
   • The apples that fell out of the basket are bruised.

   That clauses following a verb expressing mental action:
• She believes that she will be able to earn an A.
• I contend that it was wrong to mislead her.
• They wished that warm weather would finally arrive.

6. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.

• He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
• The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human.

7. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

• John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow."
• "I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment."
• In 1848, Marx wrote, "Workers of the world, unite!"

Comma Abuse

Putting a comma in the wrong place can break a sentence into illogical segments or confuse readers with unnecessary and unexpected pauses.

1. Don't use a comma to separate the subject from the verb.

• An eighteen-year old in California, is now considered an adult. (incorrect)
• The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions. (incorrect)

2. Don't put a comma between the two verbs or verb phrases in a compound predicate.

• We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study. (incorrect)
• I turned the corner, and ran smack into a patrol car. (incorrect)

3. Don't put a comma between the two nouns, noun phrases, or noun clauses in a compound subject or compound object.

• The music teacher from your high school, and the football coach from mine are married. (incorrect: compound subject)
• Jeff told me that the job was still available, and that the manager wanted to interview me. (incorrect: compound object)

4. Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it, except for cases of extreme contrast.

• She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken. (incorrect)
• The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating. (incorrect)
• She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (correct: extreme contrast)