

# Welcome to the Purdue OWL



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## **Summary:**

This resource offers a number of pages about comma use.

## Commas: Quick Rules

The comma is a valuable, useful punctuation device because it separates the structural elements of sentences into manageable segments. The rules provided here are those found in traditional handbooks; however, in certain rhetorical contexts and for specific purposes, these rules may be broken.

The following is a short guide to get you started using commas. This resource also includes sections with more detailed rules and examples.

### **Quick Guide to Commas**

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*.
2. Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.
3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.
4. 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 always essential. *That* clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential.
5. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.
6. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.

7. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.
8. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Such phrases are free modifiers that can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusion.
9. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.
10. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.
11. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

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## Extended Rules for Using Commas

### Comma Use

**1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*.**

The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.

The student explained her question, yet the instructor still didn't seem to understand.

Yesterday was her brother's birthday, so she took him out to dinner.

**2. Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.**

a. Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while*.

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.

Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.

If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.

When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

However, don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause

follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

**INCORRECT:** The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.

**CORRECT:** She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast.)

b. Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).

Having finished the test, he left the room.

To get a seat, you'd better come early.

After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.

The sun radiating intense heat, we sought shelter in the café.

c. Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include *yes*, *however*, *well*.

Well, perhaps he meant no harm.

Yes, the package should arrive tomorrow morning.

However, you may not be satisfied with the results.

**3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.**

Here are some clues to help you decide whether the sentence element is essential:

- If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense?
- Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?

If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, then the element in question is nonessential and should be set off with commas. Here are some example sentences with nonessential elements:

**Clause:** That Tuesday, *which happens to be my birthday*, is the only day when I am available to meet.

**Phrase:** This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, *on the other hand*, is rather bland.

**Word:** I appreciate your hard work. In this case, *however*, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.

**4. 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 always 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*.

He is dreaming *that he can fly*.

I contend *that it was wrong to mislead her*.

They wished *that warm weather would finally arrive*.

Examples of other **essential** elements (no commas):

Students *who cheat* only harm themselves.

The baby *wearing a yellow jumpsuit* is my niece.

The candidate *who had the least money* lost the election.

Examples of **nonessential** elements (set off by commas):

Fred, *who often cheats*, is just harming himself.

My niece, *wearing a yellow jumpsuit*, is playing in the living room.

The Green party candidate, *who had the least money*, lost the election.

Apples, *which are my favorite fruit*, are the main ingredient in this recipe.

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.

It is up to you, *Jane*, to finish.

She was, *however*, too tired to make the trip.

Two hundred dollars, *I think*, is sufficient.

**5. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.**

The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

The candidate promised to lower taxes, protect the environment, reduce crime, and end unemployment.

The prosecutor argued that the defendant, who was at the scene of the crime, who had a strong revenge motive, and who had access to the murder weapon, was guilty of homicide.

**6. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.**

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives with equal ("co"-ordinate) status in describing the noun; neither adjective is subordinate to the other. You can decide if two adjectives in a row are coordinate by asking the following questions:

- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with *and* between them?

If you answer yes to these questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma. Here are some examples of coordinate and non-coordinate adjectives:

He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)

They lived in a white frame house. (non-coordinate)

She often wore a gray wool shawl. (non-coordinate)

Your cousin has an easy, happy smile. (coordinate)

The 1) relentless, 2) powerful 3) summer sun beat down on them. (1-2 are coordinate; 2-3 are non-coordinate.)

The 1) relentless, 2) powerful, 3) oppressive sun beat down on them. (Both 1-2 and 2-3 are coordinate.)

**7. 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.

You're one of the senator's close friends, aren't you?

The speaker seemed innocent, even gullible.

**8. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Such phrases are free modifiers that can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusion. (If the placement of the modifier causes confusion, then it is not "free" and must remain "bound" to the word it modifies.)**

Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously. (correct)

**INCORRECT:** Lisa waved at Nancy, laughing joyously. (Who is laughing, Lisa or Nancy?)

Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy. (correct)

Lisa waved at Nancy, who was laughing joyously. (correct)

**9. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.**

Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.

July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life. Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC?

Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.

(When you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year:  
"The average temperatures for July 1998 are the highest on record for that month.")

**10. 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!"

**11. Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.**

To George, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

### **Comma abuse**

Commas in the wrong places can break a sentence into illogical segments or confuse readers

with unnecessary and unexpected pauses.

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

**INCORRECT:** An eighteen-year old in California, is now considered an adult.

**INCORRECT:** The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions.

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

**INCORRECT:** We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study.

**INCORRECT:** I turned the corner, and ran smack into a patrol car.

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

**INCORRECT (compound subject):** The music teacher from your high school, and the football coach from mine are married.

**INCORRECT (compound object):** Jeff told me that the job was still available, and that the manager wanted to interview me.

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

**INCORRECT:** The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.

**CORRECT:** She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast)

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## Commas After Introductions

### Introductory Clauses

Introductory clauses are dependent clauses that provide background information or "set the stage" for the main part of the sentence, the independent clause. For example:

*If they want to win*, athletes must exercise every day.

(introductory dependent clause, main clause)

*Because he kept barking insistently*, we threw the ball for Smokey.

(introductory dependent clause, main clause)

Introductory clauses start with adverbs like *after*, *although*, *as*, *because*, *before*, *if*, *since*, *though*, *until*, *when*, etc.

## Introductory phrases

Introductory phrases also set the stage for the main action of the sentence, but they are not complete clauses. Phrases don't have both a subject and a verb that are separate from the subject and verb in the main clause of the sentence. Common introductory phrases include **prepositional phrases**, **appositive phrases**, **participial phrases**, **infinitive phrases**, and **absolute phrases**.

To stay in shape for competition, athletes must exercise every day.

(introductory infinitive phrase, main clause)

Barking insistently, Smokey got us to throw his ball for him.

(introductory participial phrase, main clause)

A popular and well respected mayor, Bailey was the clear favorite in the campaign for governor.

(introductory appositive phrase, main clause)

The wind blowing violently, the townspeople began to seek shelter.

(introductory absolute phrase, main clause)

After the adjustment for inflation, real wages have decreased while corporate profits have grown.

(introductory prepositional phrases, main clause)

## Introductory words

Introductory words like *however*, *still*, *furthermore*, and *meanwhile* create continuity from one sentence to the next.

The coaches reviewed the game strategy. *Meanwhile*, the athletes trained on the Nautilus equipment.

Most of the evidence seemed convincing. *Still*, the credibility of some witnesses was in question.

## When to use a comma

Introductory elements often require a comma, but not always. Use a comma in the following cases:



- After an introductory clause.
- After a long introductory prepositional phrase or more than one introductory prepositional phrase.
- After introductory verbal phrases, some appositive phrases, or absolute phrases.
- If there is a distinct pause.
- To avoid confusion.

## When not to use a comma

Some introductory elements don't require a comma, and sometimes the subject of a sentence looks like an introductory element but isn't. Do not use a comma in the following cases:

- After a brief prepositional phrase. (Is it a single phrase of fewer than five words?)
- After a restrictive (essential) appositive phrase. (See our document on appositives.)
- To separate the subject from the predicate. (See below.)

Each of the following sentences may look like it requires a comma after the opening segment (marked with an *x*), but the opening segment is really the subject. It's sometimes easy to confuse gerund- or infinitive-phrase subjects like the following with nonessential introductory phrases, so be careful.

Preparing and submitting his report to the committee for evaluation and possible publication[x] was one of the most difficult tasks Bill had ever attempted.

To start a new business without doing market research and long-term planning in advance[x] would be foolish.

Extracting the most profit for the least expenditure on labor and materials[x] is the primary goal of a capitalist.

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## Commas vs. Semicolons in Compound Sentences

For more information on semicolons, please see the "[90-Second Semicolon](#)" vidcast series on the [Purdue OWL YouTube Channel](#).

A group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought is called a sentence or an independent clause. Sometimes, an independent clause stands alone as a sentence, and sometimes two independent clauses are linked together into what is called a compound sentence. Depending on the circumstances, one of two different punctuation marks can be used between the independent clauses in a compound sentence: a comma or a semicolon. The choice is yours.

## Comma (,)

Use a comma after the first independent clause when you link two independent clauses with one of the following coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*. For example:

I am going home, and I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon, but we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark, so they decided to camp for the night.

## Semicolon (;)

Use a semicolon when you link two independent clauses with no connecting words. *For example:*

I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; they decided to camp for the night.

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of the following conjunctive adverbs (adverbs that join independent clauses): *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc.* For example:

I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.

They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark; therefore, they decided to camp for the night.

For more information about compound sentence patterns, see the Purdue OWL handout on Sentence Punctuation Patterns.

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## Commas with Nonessential Elements

Some modifying elements of a sentence are essential, restricting the meaning of a modified term, while others are nonessential and don't restrict the modified term's meaning. These nonessential elements, which can be words, phrases, or clauses, are set off with commas.

**Rule:** Use commas before and after nonessential words, phrases, and clauses, that is, elements embedded in the sentence that interrupt it without changing the essential meaning.

If you leave out the element or put it somewhere else in the sentence, does the essential meaning

of the sentence change? If so, the element is essential; if not, it is nonessential.

Nonessential: The average world temperature, *however*, has continued to rise significantly.

(word)

Essential: The sixth-century philosopher *Boethius* was arrested, tortured, and bludgeoned to death. (word)

Nonessential: Company managers, *seeking higher profits*, hired temporary workers to replace full-time staff. (phrase)

Essential: The person *checking tickets at the counter* asked for a form of identification. (phrase)

Nonessential: My uncle, *who is eighty years old*, walks three miles every day. (clause)

Essential: The woman *who interviewed you* is my sister. (clause)

Deciding whether an element is essential or nonessential can sometimes be tricky. For help identifying two common types of phrases that can be either essential or nonessential, see the OWL handouts on verbals, which includes information on **participial phrases**, as well as the handout on appositives, which covers **appositive phrases**. Both of these documents address the essential/nonessential distinction for these kinds of phrases.

You can try three different interactive exercises that allow you to practice these rules, each with its own answer key.

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