



Commas

Use a comma to:

- Connect two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. *He wanted to watch his sister play soccer, but his girlfriend insisted on going to the movie instead.*
- Separate items in a list of words, phrases or clauses (when there are no commas within the listed items): *He decided that he would write a resume, fill out a job application, and submit it to the pizza parlor before the end of the day.*
- Separate coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun: *She wore a green, flowing gown to the dance.* (Both “green” and “flowing” modify the noun “gown.” Do not use a comma to separate one adjective from a noun or to separate adjectives from other adjectives they modify: in the phrase *a brand new house*, “brand” modifies “new.”)
- Follow introductory words at the beginning of a sentence: Moreover, Therefore, Thus, Yes, No, Well, Please, However, Still, Yet, Oh. *However, when she got there she wasn't hungry.*
- Follow introductory phrases at the beginning of a sentence:
An infinitive phrase: *To get where he was going, Frank had to walk the long way around.*
A participle phrase (with a word ending in *-ing* or *-ed*): *Dancing en pointe for many minutes at a time, the ballerina thrilled the audience. Gratified by the audience's response, she took four bows at the end of the performance.*
A prepositional phrase of more than four words: *Through the walls of her bedroom, she could hear her parents quarreling.*
- Follow a dependent or subordinate clause that comes at the beginning of a sentence: *Because she scored very high on her SAT, Jennifer was admitted to five top-ranked schools.*

NB: To get your commas just right, you need to understand another distinction sometimes at work, one concerning how the introductory adverb connects logically to the following clause; you'll need to use commas (or their absence) to show your reader this distinction. Basically, some introductory adverbs directly modify the following verb: *Soon you'll know.*

Others modify the entire following clause more generally, making some kind of comment on it, one usually concerning truth value or logical context: *Frankly, I don't care.*

As further examples, take these two sentences: *Now leave this room.* (type 1) *Now, leave this room.* (type 2)

Both these sentences are punctuated correctly—the intended meanings differ. The first “now” directly modifies “leave” and carries a clear meaning: “right now, immediately.” The second “now” modifies the entire following clause and has a less clear-cut meaning, something like

“you and I have reached a point in our conversation where it would make good sense for me to tell you to leave.”

This distinction also applies on the level of prepositional phrases; thus: *Out the window I saw a tree* (type 1). *By the way, have you seen Fred?* (type 2).

- Follow forms of address at the beginning or end of a sentence: *Lieutenant Hornblower, you will take the last watch tonight.*
- Surround forms of address in the middle of a sentence: *Please, Mother, give me a break.*
- Surround appositives, words that re-name or more fully define the previous noun: *John, my older brother, has attended three colleges.*
- Surround non-restrictive clauses, phrases or words (that is, words that could be dropped out of a sentence without disturbing the meaning of the main clause):
My brother, who used to be a fine athlete, rarely attends sporting events. He does, however, like to watch sports on TV. (NB: Do not use a comma to separate a restrictive clause or phrase: *The barn that I painted last year has been torn down.* But: *The barn, which I painted last year, has been torn down.* In the first example the clause “that I painted last year” is restrictive because it tells the reader exactly which barn the writer is talking about. It is essential to the meaning of the sentence and therefore can’t be dropped out. In the second sentence the clause “which I painted last year” is not essential. The reader knows from previous sentences which barn is being referred to, so the fact that it is the one “I painted last year” is non-restrictive.)
- Surround elements of contrast: *Ted supported the Hawkeyes, not the Cyclones. She was disappointed, but resigned to the decision.*
- Separate short statements or questions at the end of the sentence: *Your favorite pie is French silk, isn’t it?*
- Separate modifying phrases at the end of a sentence that refer to words earlier in the sentence: *The Grinch slid down the chimney of the Whos’ house, laughing nastily.*
- Separate cities or counties from states and street addresses from cities when written as part of a sentence (not in a business letter or on an envelope): *We live at 225 Jaybird Street, Grinnell, Iowa 50112.* (NB: Commas do not follow or precede zip codes.)
- Follow a state or country when used in the middle of a sentence: *She was raised in Albany, New York, but spent the rest of her life in Houston, Texas.* Separate a month and day from a year: *June 23, 1936.* (NB: It is acceptable to write June 1936 or 11 November 1918 without using commas.)
- Separate names from a title or abbreviated title that follows the name: *William Johnson, M.D.; James Jones, Esquire* (NB: Do not use a comma to separate Roman numerals from a name: *John Edward Higginbotham IV.*)
- Separate numbers with five or more digits. Using a comma in a four digit number is optional. Counting from the right, use a comma after every three digits: *2700 or 2,700*
79,123 1,543,678
- Set off direct quotations wherever they appear in the sentence. *“I wonder,” she said, “whether he’ll be home in time for dinner.”*
According to William Zinsser, “Clutter is the disease of American writing.”
(NB: Do not use a comma to precede an indirect quotation or snippet: *William Zinsser suggests that “clutter is the disease of American writing.”*)

Comma Abuse: More is Not Better

Don't use commas in the following situations:

- To separate the subject from the verb in a clause or sentence: *The old man, hobbled hastily down the street.* (Incorrect)
- To separate two or more verb or verb phrases in a compound predicate: *He finished his dinner, and went to the show.* (Incorrect)
- To separate two or more nouns or noun phrases in a compound subject or compound object: *Jane, and her sister got their pilots' licenses last year.* (Incorrect) *She said that they were going to fly to Chicago next week, and that they would visit their aunt there.* (Incorrect)
- To separate a dependent or subordinate clause that comes at the end of the sentence. *She was late to school, although she had set her alarm.* (Incorrect)

Rules Regarding other Punctuation

Use a semi-colon to:

- Link two independent clauses that are not linked by a coordinating conjunction. *She decided not to major in French; however, she did continue to attend the language table lunches.*
- Join a series of words, phrases or clauses that have commas within them. *She decided against the blue, green and violet scarves, all of which were too small; the black shoes, which were too expensive; and the gold bracelet, which was too clunky.*

Use a colon to:

- Introduce an explanation, example, list or quotation. (Remember that what precedes the colon must be an independent clause.) *He took a suitcase full of most unusual items: a thermometer, an inflatable beach ball, a harmonica, six stuffed animals and a tin of sardines.*

Jane and her parents hammered out an agreement on her use of the car: they would pay for the registration and general maintenance while she would pay for gas, parking tickets and any damages that occurred while she was driving.

Montaigne argues that simply living honorably should be one's life goal: "To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately."

(However, when introducing a quotation with a phrase rather than an independent clause, use a comma rather than a colon: *Montaigne says, "To compose our character is our duty..."*)

Exercises

1. He was hungry so he decided to go the pizza place down the street
2. She had to buy gifts for each member of her family wrap them mail the ones for her brother who lives in Chicago and make a batch of cookies
3. They lived in an old yellow brick mansion
4. I decided not to go to the movies however I did go out for a cup of coffee with them
5. Well its obvious from your question that you dont believe me
6. To get the part she auditioned for she had to learn how to speak in a Cockney accent
7. Following the river around the bend he saw a tent pitched on a sandbar
8. Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go
9. Since no one scored above 60% on the test the teacher decided to throw it out
10. Beam us up Scotty
11. "Why Marcus you old devil " he said "what are you up to these days"
12. My mother an avid reader often went with me to the library where we would check out enough books to last us for the week
13. His father who is a lawyer served as mayor of the town for twenty years
14. She had planned to attend the concert but changed her mind at the last minute
15. The American Revolutionary War ended in 1783 didnt it
16. Robin Hood lived as an outlaw robbing the rich and giving to the poor
17. She lived in Cairo Illinois as well as Cairo Egypt
18. I was born on October 16 1985 in Grinnell Iowa although later that day I was taken by ambulance to Omaha Nebraska
20. VJ day was 15 August 1945
21. Since he is a lawyer his business card reads Maxwell Smart Esquire
22. "Who put the bop in the bop-she-bop-she-bop" the song asks "Who put the lang in the langa-langa ding dong"

23. In Much Ado about Nothing Benedick says “There’s a double meaning in that”

24. John Kennedy advised Americans to ask not what your country can do for you but ask what you can do for your country

25. The quartet was composed of Julia tenor sax Alvin soprano sax Mike French horn and Olivia trombone.

26. The agenda for the meeting is as follows old business new business comments from the audience and adjournment.

Answer Key

1. He was hungry, so he decided to go the pizza place down the street.
2. She had to buy gifts for each member of her family, wrap them, mail the ones for her brother who lives in Chicago, and make a batch of cookies. (NB: There could also be a comma before “who” if the speaker has only one brother; the phrase “who lives in Chicago” would thus become non-restrictive.)
3. They lived in an old, yellow brick mansion.
4. I decided not to go to the movies; however, I did go out for a cup of coffee with them.
5. Well, it’s obvious from your question that you don’t believe me.
6. To get the part she auditioned for, she had to learn how to speak in a Cockney accent.
7. Following the river around the bend, he saw a tent pitched on a sandbar.
8. Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go.
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23. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Benedick says, “There’s a double meaning in that.”

24. John Kennedy advised Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.”

25. The quartet was composed of Julia, tenor sax; Alvin, soprano sax; Mike, French horn; and Olivia, trombone.

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