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# COMMA RULES & USAGE

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Comma errors are common among many writers, and one of the reasons commas can be so tricky is because there are so many rules governing their usage. Some of the most important rules are explained below.

## Joining Clauses:

Commas can connect dependent clauses (incomplete parts of a sentence that cannot stand on their own) with independent clauses (complete thoughts that can be sentences of their own) on their own and can connect two independent clauses with the help of a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

## Common Sentence Structures:

- Dependent Clause or Introductory Phrase + Comma + Independent Clause: Although I was hungry (dependent clause), (comma) I decided not to eat breakfast (independent clause).
- Independent Clause + Coordinating Conjunction + Dependent Clause: I was hungry (independent clause) but (coordinating conjunction) decided to skip breakfast (independent clause).
- Independent Clause + Comma + Coordinating Conjunction + Independent Clause: I was hungry (independent clause), (comma) but (coordinating conjunction) I decided to skip breakfast (independent clause).

Commas after short introductory phrases (less than three or four words) or prepositional phrases placed at the beginning of sentences may be considered optional depending on the formatting style that an author is using. However, in any situation where omitting the comma may result in confusion, a comma is highly recommended.

## Setting Off Nonessential Elements:

Commas should be used to separate nonessential words, phrases, or clauses from the main body of the sentences they're placed inside of. In the following examples, the nonessential material has been italicized:

- Bobby, *the boy limping past the swings*, hurt his knee last week.

In the example above, the sentence would still be grammatically complete if the italicized information were to be removed; consequently, it is considered "nonessential." Similar examples are shown below. The third example illustrates how an "interrupter" is also considered nonessential despite being used as a transition:

- The young girl, *angry at her parents for sending her to her room*, slammed the door.
- The dog, *drooling wildly from his gaping mouth*, wagged his tail and barked with excitement.
- The boy, *however*, was not angry and went to his room quietly.

### **Separating Items in a List & Interchangeable Adjectives:**

Lists with parallel structure that include three or more items should be punctuated with a comma between each item in the list. The comma before the final item (and its coordinating conjunction) is optional and is referred to as an “Oxford comma” or “serial comma.” An example of a correctly punctuated list is shown below:

- I ate turkey, ham, stuffing, rolls, and candied yams for dinner.

Commas should also be used to separate adjectives when the order of the adjectives is interchangeable. If the order is not interchangeable, no comma should be used. For example:

- He is a strong, healthy individual.

To test whether or not two adjectives are truly interchangeable, try reading the sentence with the word “and” between them. If the sentence still makes sense, then the adjectives are interchangeable and should be separated by a comma. If the sentence does not make sense, then the adjectives are not interchangeable and should not be separated.

### **Introducing Quotations:**

Commas should be used to introduce quoted material. For example:

- Susan Smith, the nation’s leading neuroscientist, writes, “Our brain is our most complex organ.”

If the quotation’s attribution comes after the quote itself, or within the quote (as is illustrated in the second example below), a comma should be placed at the end of the quoted material. For example:

- “Our brain is our most complex organ,” writes Susan Smith, the nation’s leading neuroscientist.
- “Our brain,” writes Susan Smith, the nation’s leading neuroscientist, “is our most complex organ.”

### **Separating Technical Information:**

Beyond being used to correctly structure sentences, commas are also used to clarify technical information. The two most common rules for formatting in these situations are as follows:

- Use a comma to separate the name of a city from its state. A comma should also be placed after the name of the state if the state’s name does not end the sentence:
  - Because I was in such a rush, I drove past St. George, Utah, without stopping.
- Use commas to enclosed specific degrees or titles:
  - Bethany Johnson, Ph.D., presented in front of the university’s English department.