



9 Common Rules for Comma Use

It's our experience that questions of comma usage often require more time than a single session to answer. Because lengthy discussion of comma usage can eclipse more pressing concerns, these sessions tend not to be as beneficial as they could be. This packet is intended to serve as a reference you can use when deciding whether or not a comma is appropriate.

When to Use Commas

1. *To separate independent clauses (complete sentences) that are joined using one of the seven coordinating conjunctions (or FANBOYS): for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*

The receptionist suffered from a sore throat, but he stayed at work.
The dog obviously wanted to play fetch, yet her owner didn't recognize this.
My car was stolen, so I filed an insurance claim.

2. *After dependent clauses, introductory phrases, or introductory words that precede the main clause.*

- a. Dependent Clauses:

While I was trying to study, my upstairs neighbor was hosting a frat party.
Because I ate too much food, I could barely move.
If you weren't planning to show up, you should have told me.

- b. Introductory Phrases:

Having no money and no prospects, he slunk home to drink away his sorrows.
Outside the window, I could see the parade.
After a week of rain, the sky was sharp and clear and bluer than normal.

- c. Introductory Words:

Yes, he punched me.
Well, I thought that's what happened.
However, it could have happened some other way.

3. *To bracket clauses, phrases, and words that provide non-essential information.*

- a. Clause:

My uncle, who runs marathons, writes advertising jingles for cereal companies.

- b. Phrase:

The movie, in my opinion, lacked any redeeming qualities.

- c. Word:

The mountains, therefore, symbolize Hemingway's fantasy of solace.

4. *To separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.*

a. Words:

When he returned home from the store, Chuck realized that he'd forgotten to buy milk, toilet paper, and marshmallows.

b. Phrases:

The girl across the street likes to jump rope, draw chalk pictures on the sidewalk, and ride her bike.

c. Clauses:

He jumped the fence, he sprinted through the backyard, and then he vaulted over the gully into the briar patch.

5. *To separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.*

Mary is a shy, introverted child.

My aunt bought an energetic, nervous dog.

6. *At the end of a sentence to indicate a distinct pause or shift.*

He was content, not overjoyed.

The dog looked thoughtful, almost human.

You're a fisherman, aren't you?

7. *To set off a phrase at the end of a sentence that refers back to the beginning or middle of that sentence.*

The crazed motorist sped away, cackling maniacally.

The lobster scuttled away from the waiter, brandishing its claws.

8. *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.*

Sacramento, California, is the state capitol.

November 4, 2008, is election day.

The election will determine who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC.

Mark Paulsen, MD, is my doctor.

9. *To shift between the main discourse and a quotation.*

Chuck ate the last slice of pizza then asked, "Was that mine or yours?"

"It was mine," I answered. "Thanks for asking."

To practice these rules, try punctuating the following sentences:

Because Mitch fell off his bike he twisted his ankle badly.

The cat was seeking affection but she couldn't catch her owner's attention.

In the kitchen Louisa was burning their dinner.

Seattle Washington is a rainy city.

Well I could have sworn I saw him but I could be wrong.

Doug is a mean spiteful man.

My new car according to my father is fancy expensive and impractical.

After tucking me in at night my mom always said "Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

The salesman was aggressive practically threatening.