



The Comma: a Punctuation Guide

You may have been taught that commas are used to mark pauses, but that is a misleading general principle. Instead, think about commas as a way to clarify meaning. They set off different elements within a sentence. The best way to know if you are placing them correctly in your sentences is to know how, when, and where to use them. This handout covers basic comma usage.

To separate items in a series

- The museum requires all visitors to leave their coats, bags, and purses in the lobby. (note: the comma after the last item in a series is optional, but use it if the sentence is not clear without it.)

In front of a coordinating conjunction that joins independent clauses

- The children enjoyed the film, **but** they were not anxious for the sequel.

After an introductory clause or phrase that is not the subject of the sentence

- When the teacher saw the paper on the floor, she knew the student was cheating. (note: the subject of the sentence here is “she.”)

To set off nonessential additions to a sentence

- My best friend, upset by her recent break-up, flew to Las Vegas for the weekend.
- The gymnasium, located on the other side of campus, has an indoor track and basketball court.

(note: the phrases between the commas in both sentences add more information about the subjects but are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. If the information is essential (restrictive) to a sentence’s meaning than do not use commas.)

Between coordinating adjectives not joined by ‘and’

- The calm, friendly dog rested on the visitor’s feet until his owner returned.

(note: the comma here is used in place of *and*. If adjectives are coordinating they each modify the noun independently and can be read in any order. E.g. “The friendly and calm dog rested on the...” or “The calm and friendly dog rested on the...”)



With transitional (includes conjunctive adverbs) and parenthetical expressions, contrasting comments, and absolute phrases

- The students who are learning English as a second language are extremely courageous; **moreover**, they are not afraid to learn from their mistakes. (*conjunctive adverb*)
(note: the transitional expression *moreover* is connecting two independent clauses in a compound sentence so it is preceded by a semicolon and followed—usually—by a comma)
- My professor, **for example**, started using public transportation to cut down on gasoline costs. (*transitional expression*)
- Lower gasoline prices, **so they say**, are a thing of the past. (*parenthetical expression*)
- **Unlike my algebra class**, English requires a lot of writing. (*contrasting comment*)

To set off words of direct address, ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ mild interjections, and tag questions

- Goodbye, Mr. Johnson. (*direct address*)
- Yes, I will gladly babysit your children tonight.
- Well, since you put it that way. (*mild interjection*)
- It’s best to leave early, don’t you think? (*tag question*)

To separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence

- The author states, “Without proper reform, our schools will fail to teach students to succeed in the 21st century” (10).
- “If you challenge pupils correctly,” the author argues, “you will find a classroom of future leaders” (12).

With parts of dates, letters, and addresses

- On June 10, 1994, the town’s most famous landmark was demolished.
- Dear Sir, / Sincerely yours,
- In San Fernando, California, you can see one of the state’s oldest missions.

With titles

- Mark Santos, MD, is one of the best family practitioners in the city.

To take the place of an omitted word or phrase or to prevent confusion

- I hide all my money under my mattress, and under my pillow, my credit cards.
(note: the second comma substitutes for the phrase *I hide*.)