

Commas

Commas are some of the most common forms of punctuation, yet their usage is often greatly abused. Complicating the matter is the flexible nature of the comma itself: sometimes commas are needed, sometimes they are not, and at other times their use is entirely dependent on the opinion of the writer. Rather than trying to learn the rules for when to use a comma, some people prefer to focus on avoiding comma errors. Following are both “how to” and “how not to” lists.

A quick schematic for comma usage with complex sentences

- Dependent clause, independent clause.

Because it's yummy, I like chocolate.

- Independent clause, dependent clause.

I like chocolate, although it's fattening.

- Independent clause, [CC] independent clause.

I like chocolate, and I like vanilla.

- Dependent clause, dependent clause.

Because it's yummy, when it's creamy.

- Independent clause, independent clause.

Cats are great, dogs are also fun.

NEVER USE A COMMA:

- Between cumulative adjectives and adverbs.

(Five, red, trucks drove down the street.)

- Between an adjective and a noun or between an adverb and an adjective.

(She liked many, new toys.)(I felt extremely, nervous.)

- After “such as” or “like” or before “than.”

(Cats, such as, tabbies, make good pets.) (I like vanilla, more than, chocolate.)

- Before an indirect quotation.

(She reminded him to, “take out the garbage.”)

- With question marks, exclamation points, parentheses, and dashes.

(He likes cats—but, not in the house.)

A comma should always appear...

- To set off introductory elements.

(Before I left home, I packed a lunch.)

- To set off nonessential (nonrestrictive) elements.

(Some people like parsnip, which is similar in shape to a carrot.)

- To separate independent clauses in a compound sentence.

(I love cats, and I also love dogs.)

- To separate coordinate adjectives.

(I liked your short, sweet book.)

- To separate three or more items in a series.

(Their flag is red, white, and blue.)

- To set off transitions, parenthetical elements, absolute phrases, and contrasts.

(Furthermore, your shoe is untied.)

- To set off nouns of direct address, tag questions, words such as yes and no, and interjections.

(Jacob, please shut the door.)

- To set off phrases that identify the source of a quotation.

(She said, “I thought you were going?”)

- To separate the parts of dates, addresses, and numbers.

(Her birthday is January 7, 1975.)

- To prevent confusion.

(Let's eat, Grandma! Vs. Let's eat Grandma!)

Comma Worksheet

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

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

If you are ill you ought to see a doctor.

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

After the test but before lunch I went jogging.

The sun radiating intense heat we sought shelter in the cafe.

Yes the package should arrive tomorrow morning.

Well perhaps he meant no harm.

She was still quite upset although she had won the Oscar.

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

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

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

The apples ***that fell out of the basket*** are bruised.

He is dreaming ***that he can fly***.

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

Students *who cheat* only harm themselves.

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

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

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.

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

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

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.

He was a difficult stubborn child.

They lived in a white frame house.

He was merely ignorant not stupid.

The chimpanzee seemed reflective almost human.

Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship laughing joyously.

Laughing joyously Lisa waved at Nancy.

John said without emotion "I'll see you tomorrow."

To George Harrison had been a sort of idol.

The most important attribute of a ball player is quick reflex actions.

Jeff told me that the job was still available and that the manager wanted to interview me.

The cat scratched at the door while I was eating.

Comma Worksheet (KEY)

The game was over, **but** the crowd refused to leave. (needs a comma before the coordinating conjunction)

Yesterday was her brother's birthday, **so** she took him out to dinner. (needs a comma before the coordinating conjunction)

If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor. ("if" indicates an introductory clause that needs to be followed by a comma)

When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway. ("When" indicates an introductory clause that needs to be followed by a comma)

After the test but before lunch, I went jogging. (long prepositional phrases need a comma after)

The sun radiating intense heat, we sought shelter in the cafe. (introductory participial phrase needs to be followed by a comma)

Yes, the package should arrive tomorrow morning. (yes is an introductory word that needs to be followed by a comma)

Well, perhaps he meant no harm. (well in an introductory word that needs to be followed by a comma)

She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (normally no comma after main clause before a dependent clause, except that in this case, there is an extreme contrast)

That Tuesday, **which happens to be my birthday**, is the only day when I am available to meet. (clause interrupts the flow of the sentence)

This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, **on the other hand**, is rather bland. (phrase interrupts the flow of the sentence)

I appreciate your hard work. In this case, **however**, you seem to have over-exerted yourself. (word interrupts the flow of the sentence)

The apples *that fell out of the basket* are bruised. (none, that clause after noun)

He is dreaming *that he can fly*. (none, that + mental action)

I contend *that it was wrong to mislead her*. (none, that + mental action)

Students *who cheat* only harm themselves. (none, essential elements)

The baby *wearing a yellow jumpsuit* is my niece. (none, essential elements)

My niece, *wearing a yellow jumpsuit*, is playing in the living room. (to separate non-essential elements)

Professor Benson, *grinning from ear to ear*, announced that the exam would be tomorrow. (to separate non-essential elements)

Tom, *the captain of the team*, was injured in the game. (to separate non-essential elements)

She was, *however*, too tired to make the trip. (to separate non-essential elements)

Two hundred dollars, *I think*, is sufficient. (to separate non-essential elements)

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. (to separate 3 or more clauses in a series)

He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)

They lived in a white frame house. (none, non-coordinate)

He was merely ignorant, not stupid. (to separate contrasted coordinate elements)

The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human. (to indicate a pause or shift)

Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously. (clarity of modifier)

Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy. (clarity of modifier)

John said without emotion, "I'll see you tomorrow." (to shift between main discourse and quotation)

To George, Harrison had been a sort of idol. (for clarity)

The most important attribute of a ball player, is quick reflex actions. (wrong, no comma between subject and verb)