

Commas

COMMAS ARE USED TO SEPARATE ELEMENTS IN A SENTENCE.

Commas clarify information by separating words, phrases, or clauses. They are used to organize information into groups, sorting it so a sentence is understood correctly.



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Introductions

Sometimes, a sentence begins with a clause, phrase, or word that sets the scene and leads the way to where the main action begins in the second half of the sentence. A comma is placed after the introduction to make the reader pause and anticipate the main information. An introduction to a sentence could be a word such as *However*, a phrase such as *Three years ago* or a clause such as *If this happens*.

This is an introductory phrase.

Once upon a time, there was a garden.

A comma is placed after the introductory phrase, before the main information is revealed.

The main information follows the comma.

This is an introductory clause.

When Lisa visited the garden, she saw a flower.

The main information comes after the comma.

A comma is placed after the introductory clause.

Working in pairs

If a sentence is interrupted by an additional phrase that is not essential to the understanding of the sentence, a comma is placed on either side of the phrase, like two parentheses. Without the commas, the information is treated as essential.

Sometimes, the interruption is placed at the beginning or end of a sentence. In these cases, only one comma is used, since a comma is never placed at the start or end of a sentence.

A flower, like a sock, can be striped.

The interruption is placed within a pair of commas to separate nonessential information.



A flower like a sock can be striped.

Without the commas, the information becomes part of the main sentence and changes its meaning.



A flower can be striped, like a sock.

A comma is placed before an interruption at the end of a sentence.

Like a sock, a flower can be striped.

A comma is placed after an interruption at the start of a sentence.



- Often, **quotations** are used without introductions, so no comma is needed. For example: **The guide says that this is “the best garden in France.”**
- Don’t use a comma if the first part of the quotation ends with an **exclamation point** or a **question mark**. For example: “Stop!” Tom cried. “The bridge is dangerous.”

GLOSSARY

- Adverb** A word that describes the way something happens.
- Clause** A grammatical unit that contains a subject and a verb.
- Conjunction** A word used to connect phrases and sentences.
- Direct speech** Text that represents spoken words.
- Interjection** A word or phrase that occurs alone and expresses emotion.
- Phrase** A group of words that does not contain a verb.

Direct speech

In direct speech, a comma should be used between the introduction to the speech and the direct speech itself. The introduction can be at the start, end, or middle of the sentence. When in the middle, use a comma on either side of the introduction, between the first and second parts of the sentence.

A comma is placed before the quotation mark, after the introduction.

Grandma asked, “Can we find more of these flowers?”



A comma is placed before the quotation mark, before an introduction.

A comma is placed before the quotation mark after the introduction.

“The flowers,” Lisa said, “are always in bloom in May.”



Direct address

Commas are always used when someone is spoken to directly, by name. The placement of the comma depends on where the name appears in a sentence. The commas work in the same way as around an interruption: commas to either side of the name when it appears in the middle of a sentence, a comma after the name when it starts a sentence, and a comma before the name when it comes at the end of a sentence.



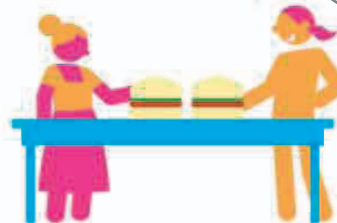
- If an **interruption** is taken out of a sentence, the sentence should still make sense.
- Commas with **interjections** such as *stop* or *help* work in the same way as those for direct address.

Let’s eat Grandma.



In this example, the comma is missing, so Grandma is about to be eaten.

Let’s eat, Grandma.



A comma is placed before the name when it appears at the end of a sentence.

Other uses of commas

COMMAS CAN BE USED TO JOIN MULTIPLE MAIN CLAUSES, REPRESENT OMITTED WORDS, AND SEPARATE ITEMS IN LISTS.

Sentences can be joined using a comma with a conjunction to create the right pace and variety in writing. A comma is also used to avoid repetition and to separate words or phrases in lists.

Commas to join clauses

Commas are used with conjunctions to join two or more main clauses to make a sentence. The comma before the last main clause is followed by one of these conjunctions: *and*, *or*, *but*, *nor*, *for*, *yet*, or *so*. If two clauses are short and closely linked, the comma can be omitted.

start of first main clause

A comma separates the first two main clauses in a set of three.

start of second main clause

Walkers turn left, joggers turn right, but cyclists go straight.

start of third main clause

A comma is placed before the conjunction *but*.

start of first main clause

start of second main clause

Sit here and enjoy the view.

No comma is needed before the conjunction because it joins two short, closely related main clauses.

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REAL WORLD

Comma butterfly

A comma is also a type of butterfly with a small, white marking on the underside of each of its wings that resembles the punctuation mark.



Commas and omitted words

When avoiding repetition that would make a sentence long and possibly boring, a comma can be used to represent the omitted words.

A comma is placed after the introductory phrase.

In the first month of the year, the flower was orange; in the second, red; and in the third, yellow.

Each of these commas represents the omitted word *month*.

• Use a **semicolon** to join two related sentences together without a conjunction.

• A **comma** can be used only with the **conjunctions** *and*, *or*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *yet*, or *so* to **join clauses**.

• **Avoid using too many commas.** When a sentence contains a lot of pauses, it is difficult to read.

Commas in lists

Commas are used to separate words or phrases in a list. A good way to test if the comma is in the correct position is to replace it with one of the conjunctions *and* or *or*. If the sentence doesn't make sense with *and* or *or*, don't add a comma.

The **comma** is one of the **most misused** punctuation marks.

My interests are walking, flowers, birds, and gardening.

My interests are walking flowers, birds, and gardening.



Each interest is separated by a comma from another interest in the list.

The last word in the list is joined by a comma followed by the word *and*.

Since there is no comma separating *walking* and *flowers*, the interest is *walking flowers*.

The comma before the conjunction is known as a "serial comma" and is useful for preventing ambiguity.

Commas with adjectives

A list of adjectives in front of a noun can be treated in two different ways. If each adjective modifies the noun, add a comma to separate them. However, if an adjective describes a combination of words that come after, no comma is needed. There are two ways to check if a comma should be used.

First, if *and* can be added between the adjectives, a comma should be placed between them. Second, swap the adjectives. If the meaning hasn't changed, it's correct to use a comma to separate the adjectives.

I saw a yellow, flying saucer.

When the comma is placed here, each adjective describes the noun separately: The saucer is flying and yellow.



I saw a blue flying saucer.

With no comma, the adjective *blue* describes the *flying saucer*.



GLOSSARY

Adjective A word that describes a noun.

Conjunction A word used to connect phrases and clauses.

Main clause A group of words that contains a subject and a verb and makes complete sense on its own.

Noun A word that refers to a person, place, or thing.

Verb A word that describes an action.



• The **serial comma**, set after the second-to-last item of the list, is especially useful when there are two instances of **and** in a sentence. For example, "The blue, pink, and black-and-white flowers have grown."