



# Using Commas

Commas are a type of punctuation that indicates smaller, softer pauses/breaks within a sentence. A comma can separate words, phrases, clauses, or ideas within a sentence. Here are 7 basic uses of commas:

## Introductory words, phrases, or clauses

Place a comma after **an introductory word or phrase** in order to signal that the main subject and main verb are going to come later in the sentence.

- ⇒ **Example: Generally**, extraterrestrials are friendly and helpful.
- ⇒ **Example: In fact**, Godzilla is just a misunderstood teen lizard of giant proportions.
- ⇒ **Example: If you feel nauseated**, then you may be getting sick.

## Separate independent clauses (using coordinating conjunctions – FANBOYS)

A comma needs to be placed before **a conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) in a sentence when joining two independent clauses. An independent clause is when a subject and a verb make a complete thought. A comma connects a complete thought with another complete thought.

- ⇒ **Example:** You wore a lovely hat, **but** it didn't match your outfit.
- ⇒ **Example:** My hamster loved to play, **so** I gave him a hula-hoop.

## Items in a series/list

Commas are used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses that are written in a series. A comma is placed between each item in a series in order to separate them from one another. Additionally, a conjunction such as “and” or “or” can be placed before the last item. Remember, a conjunction is a word that joins words, phrases, ideas, and clauses with the goal of showing how they are connected (e.g. for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

- ⇒ **Example:** The dog is fluffy, lazy, and sweet.
- ⇒ **Example:** When Bob went to the store, he bought milk, cheese, and bread.

## Direct Quotations

A comma can be used before a quotation after phrases like he/she said, the author stated, the author concludes, etc.

- ⇒ **Example:** The author **stated**, “The evidence I found supported my hypothesis.”
- ⇒ **Example:** My father pointed at a photograph and **said**, “That’s me in the ‘80s.”



## Appositives and nonrestrictive clauses

An appositive is a noun that renames a nearby noun. Nonrestrictive appositives are set off with commas; restrictive appositives are not. Use commas to enclose clauses not essential to the meaning of a sentence. These nonessential clauses are called nonrestrictive. Clauses which are essential are called restrictive.

- ⇒ **Example of a clause set off with commas:** My grandfather, **who is ninety years old**, walks two miles every day.
- ⇒ **Example of a phrase set off with commas:** The amusement park has a very thrilling atmosphere. The food, **on the other hand**, is very dull.
- ⇒ **Example of a word set off with commas:** Kevin decided, **nonetheless**, not to buy the car.”

## Dates Addresses, Titles, and Numbers

Commas are used with geographical names in order to set off the different types of elements from each other (city or town, state, region, country). In terms of dates, a comma is used to set off the day from the year, but no comma is necessary to separate the month from the day ( i.e. January 6, 2021). No comma is necessary when you only use the month and the year (i.e. She was born in September 1997). Commas are also used in addresses to separate all elements except for the zip code and the street number from the street name.

- ⇒ **Example:** My brother was born on **December 23**, 1994.
- ⇒ **Example:** Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from **Birmingham, England**.
- ⇒ **Example:** His father has lived at 1400 **Pennsylvania Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts** 60611 all his life.
- ⇒ **Example:** 3,500 [or 3500]. 100,000. 6,000,000.

## Coordinating Adjectives

Commas are used to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that are describing the same noun. Coordinate adjectives are adjectives that have equal status when it comes to describing a noun and neither is subordinate to the other. To decide if two adjectives in a row are coordinate you can ask yourself these questions:

1. Would the sentence make sense if the adjectives were written in reverse order?
2. Would the sentence make sense if there was an and between the adjectives?



If the answer to both of these questions is yes, then the adjectives are coordinated and need a comma to separate them. When two or more adjectives are used to describe something, there is an established Order of Adjectives. In English, the Order of Adjectives is **opinion**, **size**, **age**, **shape**, **color**, **origin**, material, and **purpose**.

- ⇒ **Example:** He was a **happy, young** child.
- ⇒ **Example:** The cabin was next to a **peaceful, blue** river.

## Comma Splices

A comma splice is when you try to connect two complete thoughts with a comma. This is incorrect since complete sentences should end with a period.

- ⇒ **Incorrect example:** You wore a lovely hat, it looked very good with your sweater.
- ⇒ **Incorrect example:** There were several problems with the paper, the main problem was with the author's use of commas.

## Practice on Your Own!

1. Our dinner was a concoction of pasta chicken and bacon.
2. Sam said "I want chocolate!"
3. The business was located at 3456 Melrose Park Illinois.
4. A beautiful antique mixing bowl.
5. It was the plot of the movie not the actors or special effects that attracted audience members.

## Answer Key

1. Our dinner was a concoction of pasta, chicken, and bacon.
2. Sam said, "I want chocolate!"
3. The business was located at 3456 Melrose Park, Illinois.
4. A beautiful, antique mixing bowl.
5. It was the plot of the movie, not the actors or special effects, that attracted audience members.

**Further Assistance:** For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.