

Commas¹

SUU Writing Center

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Do you use more commas than you need because someone taught you to insert a comma every place you might pause in reading your paper aloud? Be careful when using that rule. It doesn't always work because different people may pause in different places. In the situations listed below, examples show correct comma usage in academic writing.

A. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses (in other words, complete sentences) linked by a coordinating conjunction.²

These conjunctions include the following joining words: (remember the acronym FANBOYS): <i>for</i> , <i>and</i> , <i>nor</i> , <i>but</i> , <i>or</i> , <i>yet</i> , and <i>so</i> .	I knew she was married, but I did not realize that she already had three children!
Exception: Some editors assert that you may omit the comma when the clauses are short. However, check with your professor to see if s/he agrees.	Many are called but few are chosen.
Important tip: This rule works only when you're dealing with complete sentences. If you use a comma to separate two subjects, two verbs, or any other set of two fragments, you'll be making a mistake.	WRONG: <u>The dog, and the cat are howling.</u> NOTE: Look at the groups of words that fall before and after the coordinating conjunction. Unless both structures are complete sentences, you should NOT use a comma.

B. Use commas to set off fragments that describe nouns when the phrases and clauses are *not* definitive.

DEFINITIVE means the group of words describing a noun answers the question "which one?" Some books describe such groups of words as "essential" or "restrictive." Don't use commas with definitive elements.	DEFINITIVE: She understands people <i>who are blunt</i> . NOTE: The clause "who are blunt" tells us which particular kind of people she understands.
NOT DEFINITIVE means that the information contained in the group of words does not narrow the identity of the noun to one particular person, place, thing, or category of persons, places, or things. Some books describe such elements as "nonessential" or "nonrestrictive." Use commas with elements that are not definitive.	NOT DEFINITIVE: Elise, <i>who teaches French</i> , speaks three other languages fluently. NOTE: The clause isn't needed to identify <i>Elise</i> ; her identity has already been established by her name.

¹ Form and content in this tipsheet were adopted from the following source:

Aaron, Jane E. *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*. 4th ed. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 2001.

² For further information in this type of sentence structure, see tipsheet on Run-Ons and Comma Splices.

<p>At times, deciding whether an element is definitive or not definitive depends on the meaning you want to convey.</p>	<p>DEFINITIVE: My aunt <i>who lives in Bolivia</i> has a spunky personality. NOTE: The writer has many aunts, but the one to whom she is referring lives in Bolivia. The clause is definitive because the writer is using it to narrow down the identity of her aunt to one particular woman.</p> <p>NOT DEFINITIVE: My aunt, <i>who lives in Bolivia</i>, has a spunky personality. NOTE: The speaker is referring to her only aunt, who, by the way, lives in Bolivia.</p>
<p>Tips for applying the definitive/ not definitive comma rule:</p> <p>Identify the element. Ask yourself whether the element is necessary to narrow the identity of the noun down to one particular or specific category. In other words, does it answer the question “which one?” If no, use commas. OR If yes, leave out the commas.</p>	<p>The state of Utah, <i>which contains many famous national parks</i>, has numerous desert areas. NOTE: The italicized clause is just added information. It is not needed to answer the question “which Utah?”; thus, the commas are correct.</p>

C. Set off most introductory fragments with a comma.

<p>Introductory elements that should be set off with a comma usually begin with <i>-ing</i> constructions or with clauses that start with words such as <i>as, after, although, as, because, even though, if, since, and when</i>. The trick here is to realize that if the word or group of words at the start of the line isn't a complete sentence, you should set that introductory fragment off with a comma.</p>	<p>As the sun rose, I ate my breakfast. [Subordinate clause] Eating my breakfast, I watched the sun rise. [Verbal phrase] In the distant horizon, the sun rose. [Prepositional phrase] Of course, she ate her breakfast while watching the sunrise. [Transitional Element]</p>
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D. Separate items in a list or series with commas.

<p>Items in a series need to total at least three for this comma rule to apply.</p>	<p>NO COMMAS NEEDED: Toasted bread and grilled onions make for a low budget lunch.</p> <p>COMMAS NEEDED: Toasted bread, grilled onions, and Swiss cheese make for a low budget lunch.</p>
<p>Exception: In journalism, it is common for reporters to omit the last comma in the series. However, academic writers should include the last comma.</p>	<p>JOURNALISTIC EXCEPTION: Toasted bread, grilled onions and Swiss cheese make for a low budget lunch.</p>

E. Separate coordinating adjectives.

Separate descriptive adjectives that could be separated with the word <i>and</i> .	The young toddler's <i>frail, delicate</i> hands slipped easily into the cookie jar.
Exception: Commas come in a variety of forms and can be generally categorized as numbers, general descriptive, age, color, materials, and origins. If two adjectives come from the same category, a comma is needed to separate the words. If they come from different categories, no comma is necessary. Use the " <i>and</i> test" mentioned above and the reversal test explained below to help you decide whether a comma is needed.	The <i>three young</i> toddlers had cookie crumbs of guilt all over their clothes. (<i>Three</i> and <i>young</i> are from two different categories. "Three" comes from the number category. "Young" comes from the age category. Thus, no comma is necessary between them.)
"And" Test and Reversal Test: Identify the adjectives Ask if the adjectives can be reversed without changing meaning. Ask if the word <i>and</i> can be inserted between the adjectives without changing meaning. If you answer "yes" to either question, the adjectives should be separated by a comma. If you answer "no" to both questions, the adjectives should not be separated by a comma.	My grandmother's <i>wild wiry</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. My grandmother's <i>wiry wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. My grandmother's <i>wiry and wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. YES: This sentence needs a comma: My grandmother's <i>wiry, wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it.

F. Set off dates with years and complex addresses and place names with commas.

When these items appear in sentences, you should set them off with commas as shown at right.	On <i>June 12, 2009</i> , I arrived in <i>Cedar City, Utah</i> , from <i>Ft. Lauderdale, Florida</i> .
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