

## COMMAS

Commas are one of the most used punctuation marks and have several rules. Commas are important for clarity and understanding. A comma ( , ) is used to separate items in a list or certain words, clauses, or phrases within a sentence. Students are often told to use a comma wherever they think there should be a pause, however this is not a reliable rule. Read on to learn when to use commas.

### SEPARATE ITEMS IN A SERIES

Whenever there are two or more things in a list, use a comma to separate them. For example:

- The college students love studying outside, eating at the dining hall, and going to the library.

**Optional Oxford, or serial, comma:** When there are three or more items in a list, the comma before the “and” is optional. Most style guides accept and encourage the Oxford comma for extra clarity. For example, you could also write the above sentence as:

- The college students love studying outside, eating at the dining hall and going to the library.

### CONNECT TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES (WITH A CONJUNCTION)

To combine two independent clauses, use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Note that “because” is not a conjunction and a comma should not be used before it.

- He used to eat meat, but now he is a vegetarian.

**Comma splice:** It is incorrect to use a comma to connect two independent clauses without a conjunction. For example, this sentence contains a comma splice:

- Incorrect comma splice: Garfield loves lasagna, he eats it all the time.

To correct this sentence, you need to add a conjunction or make them two separate sentences, such as:

- Garfield loves lasagna, so he eats it all the time.
- Garfield loves lasagna. He eats it all the time.

### SET OFF WORDS OR PHRASES

#### Introductory Words and Phrases

An introductory word or phrase typically gives background information about the who, what, when, where, why, and/or how described in the sentence. A comma follows the introductory word/phrase:

- According to the doctor, you need to eat an apple a day.

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## Transitional Words and Phrases (Conjunctive Adverbs)

Conjunctive adverbs are transitional words or phrases used to transition between paragraphs or ideas and should be followed by a comma. Transitional words include “however,” “in addition,” “next,” “furthermore,” “finally,” and “thus.”

- Popeye eats several cans of spinach a day; therefore, he is incredibly healthy and strong.

## Direct Quotes

When inserting a direct quote into your writing, use a comma to separate the attributive tag that explains who is speaking.

- The author states, “This is a serious matter.”

## Parenthetical Elements

Parenthetical elements are used to offset additional or nonessential information.

- Mark Twain, a famous author, was actually a pen name.

## Coordinate Adjectives

Coordinate adjectives are words that describe some attribute of the same noun or subject. They must modify the noun equally, meaning that you could put the adjectives in any order or add an “and” between them. If you can do that, they should be separated by a comma.

- Yesterday was another bright, sunny day in the Las Vegas desert.

## MISCELLANEOUS

The previous sections describe the academic rules for using commas. However, there are also a few other rules to take note of:

### Dates

Use commas to separate items in dates (between the day of the week and month and between the day and year). If the date ends with a number, you use a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

- On Tuesday, October 25, 2005, her sister was born.

### Geographical Names and Addresses

Commas are used to set off geographical addresses (between streets, cities, and states or countries).

- The address from *Finding Nemo* is 42 Wallaby Way, Sydney, Australia.

### Titles and Degrees

When a person’s title or degree follows their name, use commas to separate them from the name.

- John Smith, M.D., is the newest addition to the team.