

Common Commas Overview

Series Commas	Purpose: Separate items in a list Example: Sid is going to the store to buy apples, oranges, and pears.
Commas with a Coordinating Conjunction	Purpose: Separate two complete sentences joined with a Coordinating Conjunctions Example: I visit my cousins often but not my uncles. I visit my cousins often, but I do not visit my uncles.
Parenthetical Commas	Purpose: Offset extra information in the middle of a sentence Example: My sister, who lives in Abbotsford, has two children.
Introductory Comma	Purpose: Offset words that introduce a complete sentence. Example: Unfortunately, Phil was delayed at the border. When Jamar returned, the video was almost over.
Reverse-Introductory Comma	Purpose: Offset material that follows a complete sentence. Example: The traffic is heaviest in Vancouver in the second week of September.
Coordinate Adjective Comma	Purpose: Separate adjectives that describe a single noun. Example: The bored, impatient children waited for recess.
Subject/Verb Comma	Rule: Do not put a comma between a subject and a verb in a sentence. Make sure an Introductory Comma is followed by a complete sentence. If it isn't, don't use a comma. Incorrect: Another advantage of the job, is that the hours are flexible. Correct: Another advantage of the job is that the hours are flexible.

Common Commas - Introduction

Commas usually follow a flexible structure. There are 4 common places for commas to be:

1. Lists and coordinating conjunctions
2. introduce sentences
3. attach additional information at the end of complete sentences, or
4. offset information in the middle of sentence

There are 7 common commas to for writer's to be aware about:



1) Series Commas “Oxford Comma”

Purpose: Separate items in a list from each other.

Always use a final comma in a list, even before the word ‘and’ or ‘or,’ to avoid any ambiguity.

The sentence below would be clear even without the final series comma because it lists objects.

Sid is going to the store to buy apples, oranges, and pears.

Some sentences are confusing without the final comma. For example, it’s not clear in the sentence below whether Ethel is being described as ‘a gossip and a social climber’ or whether there’s a missing series comma and Bob has been left alone with three different people, only one of whom is Ethel.

Bob felt nervous when Bill left him alone with Ethel, a notorious gossip and a pretentious social climber.

Bob felt nervous when Bill left him alone with Ethel, a notorious gossip, and a pretentious social climber.

Note: you should only use a series commas if there are three or more items.

2) Comma with a Coordinating Conjunction

Purpose: Separate two complete sentences joined with a Coordinating Conjunctions

Note: Coordinating Conjunctions = for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. ‘As’ and ‘for’ are only CC’s when they mean *because*.

For example: I went home, as I had a headache. I went home, for I had a headache.

Commas are used with a coordinating conjunction only when they are joining two complete sentences.

complete sentence + CC + incomplete sentence = don’t use a comma

I visit my cousins often but not my uncles.

complete sentence + CC + complete sentence = use a comma

I visit my cousins often, but I do not visit my uncles.

Tips when using CC’s

- Ignore the CC when you are determining whether the sentence is complete or incomplete. For example, only consider whether ‘I do not visit my uncles’ is a complete sentence and ignore the word ‘*but*.’



- You should not apply the CC rule to words that resemble CC's. For example, don't treat the word '*however*' as if it is the coordinating conjunction '*but*' or you will end up with a comma splice error.

Correct: Bob is a musician by trade, but he is currently unemployed.
Incorrect: Bob is a musician by trade, however he is currently unemployed.

- A sentence that begins with a pronoun like '*this*,' '*it*,' '*he*,' or '*they*' is still considered a complete sentence because a pronoun carries the same grammatical weight as the noun it replaces.

Bob bought some bananas, but the bananas were rotten.
Bob bought some bananas, but they were rotten.

There is one exception to the rule for punctuating coordinating conjunctions. Sometimes the word '*but*' is used as part of a sentence that uses the word '*not*' in the first half and '*but*' in the second half. In this case, even though the word '*but*' often isn't followed by a complete sentence, a comma is often used to highlight the contrast between the two ideas being discussed.

Rob is not only looking for a new job, but planning a career change as well.

3) Parenthetical Commas "Bracket Commas"

Purpose: Use commas to offset material in the middle of a sentence

Use commas to offset any material in the middle of a sentence that is not essential to the sentence's meaning or means the same as something else in the sentence. If you can remove the information in question and you are left with a complete sentence, then you can usually enclose that information with a pair of commas, just as you would use brackets.

A parenthetical comment can consist of a single word or of a longer group of words.

Fred is going to go to Mary's party. Bob, however, can't make it.
My sister, who lives in Abbotsford, has two children.

If removing the information enclosed by commas would alter the meaning of the sentence, then you cannot use commas. So even though the words surrounding it form a complete sentence, the material cannot be offset with commas as if it contains additional information. For example:

Members who bring guests to the open house will receive a gift package.

In this example the underlined information changes the meaning of the sentence: not all members will receive a gift package, only the ones who bring guests to the open house.

In some cases, adding parenthetical commas actually changes the meaning of the sentence. In the example below, the sentence suggests that all famous actors deserve their celebrity status, and the underlined comment appears to offer an explanation of why they deserve to be famous. The second sentence means that only famous actors who train for years deserve to be celebrities, in contrast to actors who haven't trained but have somehow become successful.



Famous actors, who train for years to learn their craft, deserve their celebrity status.

Famous actors who train for years to learn their craft deserve their celebrity status.

4) Introductory Commas

Purpose: Offset information that comes before a complete sentence

Use a comma after a single word or a group of words that precedes a complete sentence.

When Jamar returned, the video was almost over.

Without the comma after the word '*returned*,' the sentence initially seems to suggest that Jamar has returned the video.

With longer introductory elements, a comma can greatly improve the clarity of your sentence because it sends a clear signal to the reader that he or she has arrived at the main message of the sentence.

Although Bob worked hard on his history paper, he does not feel tired.

In the sentence above, the main message is the idea that Bob isn't tired.

In academic writing, it also makes sense to give the reader the opportunity to pause after introductory words like "*however*," "*moreover*," "*furthermore*," and "*consequently*," because these words allow a brief pause to process the logical connections between sentences.

Many introductory clauses begin with a **subordinating conjunction**: '*although*,' '*because*,' '*before*,' '*even though*,' '*even if*,' '*if*,' '*once*,' '*provided that*,' '*rather than*,' '*since*,' '*unless*,' '*until*,' '*when*,' '*whenever*,' '*whereas*,' '*whether*,' & '*while*.'

A subordinating conjunction becomes part of the sentence. Therefore, you should not put a comma immediately after a subordinating conjunction. You must put the comma after the whole introductory comment to create a pause before the main message.

Incorrect: Jill is hoping to go to the dance tonight. Although, she is not sure whether she'll be able to get off work early. She thinks she'll be able to make up the hours next week.

Correct: Jill is hoping to go to the dance tonight. Although she is not sure whether or not she'll be able to get off work early, she thinks she'll be able to make up the hours next week.

5) Reverse-Introductory Commas

Purpose: Attach additional information that follows a complete sentence



Put a comma after a complete sentence when it is followed by a comment that is not a complete sentence. With a Reverse-Introductory Comma, the extra information follows the complete sentence. For example,

The traffic is heavy in Vancouver, especially in the second week of September.

Remember that the information after the comma must be additional information that could have been conveyed in a separate sentence. If you need the information in the second half of the sentence to understand the sentence, you can't use a comma.

Incorrect: The traffic is heaviest in Vancouver, in the second week of September.

Correct: The traffic is heaviest in Vancouver in the second week of September.

Note: Two common ways of adding a comma to a sentence are with an -ing word or with the pronoun 'which.'

Bob stood beside his brother, **hoping** they would both be chosen for the team.
Sarah is Fred's neighbor, **which** is why she often drives his daughter to school.

6) Subject/Verb Commas

Rule: Don't put a comma between the subject and the verb in a sentence.

Incorrect: Another advantage of the job, is that the hours are flexible.

Correct: Another advantage of the job is that the hours are flexible.

7) Coordinate Adjective Comma

Purpose: Separate adjectives that describe a single noun.

If two adjectives separately describe a single noun, put a comma between them.

Note: Can the order of the adjectives be reversed without changing the meaning or if the word 'and' can be used between the two words? If yes to either of these questions, you should use a comma.

The bored, impatient children waited for recess.

In the first sentence above, impatient, bored children would not sound odd, nor would bored and impatient children, so you should use a comma between the two adjectives.

Sarah has tried several new products on her hair.

In the second sentence, you could not say new several products, nor could you say several and new products. The word several doesn't just describe the word products; it describes new products, so there should be no comma.

