

COMMA USAGE RULES:

1) List of 3 or more things.

There is still some debate about if there should be a comma before the “and” at the end of a list (often called the Oxford Comma). In general, I have seen more modern texts insert a comma before “and” as I have done here.

- *James ordered a burger, fries, and a milkshake.*
- *Carlos wants to visit Paris, Italy, Germany, and China.*
- *I like to go hiking, fishing, swimming, and camping during summer.*
- *I have to clean my room, walk the dog, and take out the trash.*
- *I need to visit my mother, wash my car, and buy six stamps.*

2) Adjective, adjective noun

If you can use the word “and” in between two adjectives, then a comma can be placed there instead.

- *Marcelo has a happy, furry dog.*
- *The hungry, green, slimy Martian opened the door and ate my cat.*
- *The pale, sweating, panicky students screamed in fright.*
- *The hot, spicy squid stew looks delicious.*
 - NOTE: there is no comma between squid and stew, since you would not say “The squid and stew looks delicious”
- *Walker Lee obtained a long, pointed Hudson Bay dagger*
 - NOTE: “Hudson Bay dagger” is a noun; neither “Hudson” nor “Bay” is an adjective here. You would not say “Hudson and Bay and dagger,” so you should not put a comma between “Hudson” and “Bay” and “dagger”
- *The tall, handsome Vice President of the company greeted us at the door.*
 - NOTE: “Vice President” is a noun; “Vice” is not an adjective here. You would not say “Vice and President,” so you should not put a comma between the words “Vice” and “President.”
- *She wrapped the gift in striped, bright pink paper.*
 - NOTE: “bright pink” is a single adjective and “paper” is the noun; “bright” is not an adjective on its own here. You would not say “bright and pink,” so you should not put a comma between the words “bright” and “pink.”

3) Quotes

Use the rule: word - comma - quote. In some cases, another punctuation point will take the place of a comma (see the 2nd and 4th examples below). It may be more beneficial to use the more general rule: word - punctuation mark - quote.

- *“Today will be rainy,” the weatherman said with a frown.*
- *He said, “We need to lower taxes!”*
 - NOTE: the rule still applies here at the end, just with an exclamation point instead of a comma. A period, exclamation point, or question mark can be used instead of a comma in the word – comma – quote rule.
- *My mother sighed, “You ate all the cookies,” with an exasperated expression.*
- *“If I don’t wake up in time,” he whispered, “I will be in trouble.”*

4) Locations, Dates, Titles

Geographic locations that include the city, state, and/or country need commas.

- *My address is 123 Memory Lane, Chicago, IL 60605*

Dates that include the month, date, and year need commas.

- *Sunday, December 7, 1941, is that day that marks the bombing of Pearl Harbor.*

Titles such as Jr. and MD must be offset by commas

- *Jon James, Jr., is not the son of Jon James, MD.*

5) Nonessential Information

A nonessential/nonrestrictive element is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. If it is removed from the sentence, the sentence will still make sense.

- *Michelle and her best friend, Jenny, went to dinner.*
 - NOTE: Michelle has only one best friend, so naming her is not essential and should be separated by commas
- *Michelle and her friend Jenny went to dinner.*
 - NOTE: Michelle has many friends, so naming her is essential and should not be separated by commas.
- *Paulo Coelho’s best-selling novel, The Alchemist, is being made into a movie.*
 - NOTE: Coelho has only one best-selling novel, so naming it is not essential and should be separated by commas

Before continuing, it is necessary to distinguish between **Independent Clauses** and **Dependent Clauses**. In simple terms, an Independent Clause is a complete sentence and a Dependent Clause is an incomplete sentence. There is no limit to how long or short either of these clauses can be. An Independent Clause can be as short as “She knows.” A Dependent Clause can be long like “Because the weather is good and we have the day off work...” What is important is determining if the clause can stand alone (Independent) or needs something else to be complete (Dependent). One clue is that a Dependent Clause often begins with a **Subordinating Conjunction** (i.e. though, although, even though, even if, no matter, unless, whether, whereas, except, without, if, as long as, provided, since, so that, which, until, as, as if, while, once, when, whenever, after, because). Commas separate Independent Clauses from Dependent Clauses, no matter what order they appear in.

6) Independent, Dependent (Concluding Element)

Dependent Clauses usually begin with a Subordinating Conjunction (although, except, even though, though, unless, whereas, while, whether).

- *Everyone politely ate the meal, even though it tasted like dog food.*
- *We have agreed to move forward, whereas he continues to raise doubts.*
- *The month went well, except for the last day.*
- *Sue wrote poems throughout the years, leaving behind a legacy.*
- *She enjoys reading because it gives her an escape from her troubles.*
 - NOTE: a comma never precedes the subordinating conjunction “because.”

7) Dependent, Independent (Introductory Element)

Dependent Clauses usually begin with a Subordinating Conjunction (as, after, although, because, even though, now that, once, rather than, since, though unless, whenever, whereas, while).

- *Without giving it any further thought, Will threw his phone into the lake.*
- *Since it has stopped raining, let’s go outside to play.*
- *To become an astronaut, it takes much hard work and determination.*
- *As my sister slumbered, I tossed and turned the bed next to her.*
- *Because she is only twelve, she is not old enough to drive.*
 - NOTE: In this case, it is acceptable to begin a sentence with “because”
- *After studying for hours, Sam felt prepared for the exam.*

8) Part of Independent, Dependent, Part of Independent (Interrupting Element)

A good test for this is to ignore the interrupting clause surrounded by the 2 commas and then read the rest of the sentence all the way through. If it makes sense (is an Independent Clause) without the interrupting clause (Dependent Clause), the commas are most likely in the correct location.

- *Evolution, as far as we know, does not produce flying humans.*
- *The car, a 1967 ford mustang, is very fast.*
- *Gold watches, for example, are going on sale today.*
- *Years later, at a family event, Lee discovered the cherished book.*
- *Traveling across time zones, particularly via airplane, can be exhausting.*

9) Independent, (FANBOYS) Independent.

If there is a Coordinating Conjunction (FANBOYS) between 2 Independent Clauses, a comma must be placed before it. Coordinating Conjunctions can also be placed between an Independent Clause and a Dependent Clause. However, in that case, there should NOT be a comma placed before it.

Coordinating Conjunctions (FANBOYS):

For And Nor But Or Yet So

- *We will go to the restaurant now, for we are very hungry.*
 - NOTE: “for” is similar to using the words “because” or “since”
- *Terry is working on a project, and he should be finished within next week.*
 - NOTE: If the sentence is “Terry is working on a project and should be finished within next week,” then there is not a comma before “and.”
- *I do not like biology, nor do I like chemistry.*
 - NOTE: If the sentence is “I do not like biology nor chemistry,” then there is not a comma before “nor.”
- *They like chocolate, but they like vanilla better.*
- *We can go to the zoo, or we can go to the movie theater.*
 - NOTE: If the sentence is “We can go to the zoo or the movie theatre,” then there is not a comma before “or.”
- *James wants to leave now, yet we must wait for his little brother.*
- *They have already completed their essays, so Lindsey is busy correcting them.*