

# Comma Tips

A comma often indicates a slight pause. It helps your reader figure out which words go together in a sentence and which parts of your sentences are the most important. Using commas correctly may seem confusing, but it can be easy if you follow a few guidelines. (Additional information can be found in *The Little, Brown Handbook* 430-52.)

## Commas in Compound Sentences

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses. Use commas to separate independent clauses, or complete thoughts, when they are joined by coordinating conjunctions: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so** (*fanboys*). Always use a comma **before fanboys** that join two independent clauses (two subjects and two verbs that make up two complete thoughts). (*LBH* 259, 432-33).

*Example:* The fog rolled in, so the sky was gray and gloomy.  
complete thought   fanboy   complete thought

*Practice:* I haven't made your dinner for you nor do I intend to do so.

Everyone wants to take part in the dance yet no one wants to set up for it.

## Do not put a comma

- Between two equal parts of a sentence that are not independent clauses.

*Incorrect:* My neighbor's dog dislikes children, and hates the mailman.  
complete thought / independent clause   incomplete thought

*Correct:* My neighbor's dog dislikes children and hates the mailman.

- Between independent clauses that have no coordinating conjunction between them.

*Incorrect:* Matt is a great pitcher, he is a great first baseman too.  
complete thought   complete thought  
(comma splice)

*Correct:* Matt is a great pitcher. He is a great first baseman too.

**The Dreaded Comma Splice** (*LBH* 344-47). If a *fanboy* is not used between two complete and separate thoughts, using a comma alone causes a **comma splice**. There are four ways to correct comma splices:

- just add *fanboys*
- change the comma to a semicolon
- make each clause a separate sentence
- add a subordinator (a word like *because, while, although, if, when, since, etc.*)

## Commas in Complex Sentences

A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. When the dependent clause appears **first**, it is followed by a **comma**. When the independent clause comes **first**, a **comma is not used**. (LBH 265).

*Example:* After they finished studying, Juan and Maria went to the movies.  
*dependent clause* *independent clause*

Juan and Maria went to the movies after they finished studying.  
*independent clause* *dependent clause--no comma needed*

*Practice:*

When he handed in his assignment he forgot to give the teacher the last page.

The students are studying because they have a test tomorrow.

## Commas in Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

Setting off introductory words, phrases, or clauses with a comma lets the reader know that that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. **Introductory phrases and clauses cannot stand alone as complete thoughts**. (LBH 433-34).

### Introductory Words

Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include words like *yes, no, well, oh*, and so on.

*Example:* Well, I see you have completed the assignment.

A **transition** should also be followed by a comma. Transitions are words or phrases that lead a reader from one idea to another. (LBH 433-34).

*Example:* **First**, an athlete should warm up before running.  
**Frequently**, people injure themselves by exercising too much.  
**In conclusion**, exercise is a great way to stay fit and healthy.

**Introductory Phrases** contain two to four words. (A phrase is a group of words that is missing a subject, a verb, or both and is not a complete sentence.)

*Example:* **Throughout his life**, Thomas Jefferson was a farmer.  
*introductory phrase* *independent clause*

**Introductory Clauses** are more than four words that **cannot** stand alone. (A clause is a group of words containing a subject and a verb.)

*Example:* **As far as I am concerned**, we can take an early vacation this year.  
*introductory clause* *independent clause*