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 A Writer’s Reference 317-33.)

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 to join two independent clauses (two subjects and two verbs that make up two complete thoughts) (A Writer’s Reference 317 and 329).

Example: The fog rolled in, so the sky was gray and gloomy.

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

The Dreaded Comma Splice (A Writer’s Reference 266-70) 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 (A Writer’s Reference 331).

Example: After they finished studying, Juan and Maria went to the movies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>dependent clause</th>
<th>independent clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juan and Maria went to the movies after they finished studying.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 after Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

Setting off introductory words, phrases, or clauses with a comma lets the reader know that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. Introductory phrases and clauses cannot stand alone as complete thoughts (A Writer’s Reference 318-19).

Introductory Words

Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include words such as 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 (A Writer’s Reference 325-26).

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 or more 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 Clauses

are groups of words that cannot stand alone as sentences. (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.