

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.
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 comma splice complete thought

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.
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 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 phrase *independent clause*

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.
introductory clause *independent clause*