

BASIC COMMAS

By Marian Anders

List of Three or More Things

Use commas to separate items in a **list of three or more things**:

Sue, Sally, and Sandy went to the movies.

The wide receiver ran past the lineman, down the field, and into the end zone.

The customer ordered a hamburger, large fries, an apple pie, and a chocolate shake.

If the list has only two items, don't use a comma:

The cat clawed the drapes and the couch.

Compound Sentences

Use a comma with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS) to separate **two independent clauses**:

Coordinating Conjunctions: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

Independent Clause: a group of words that has a subject and a verb and sounds finished

Samantha was cold, so she put on her jacket.

Mark mowed the grass, and he trimmed the shrubs.

Jill wanted to go to the party, but she had to work.

If the sentence doesn't have two independent clauses, don't use a comma:

Mark mowed the grass and trimmed the shrubs.

Dates and Place Names

Use commas to separate the parts of **dates and place names**:

Abby was born on December 10, 2011.

Abby was born in Burlington, North Carolina.

Giselle was born in Paris, France.

If the sentence continues after the date or place name, use another comma, like this:

Abby was born on December 10, 2011, on a Thursday.

Abby was born in Durham, North Carolina, at Duke Hospital

Giselle was born in Paris, France, during a snow storm.

Introductory Material

Use a comma after **something extra at the beginning of a sentence**. Extra means that you could leave off those words and still have a good sentence. The extra material could be a phrase or a dependent clause

Phrase: a group of words that doesn't have a subject and a verb

Dependent Clause: a group of words that has a subject and a verb but sounds unfinished because it starts with a subordinating conjunction

Subordinating Conjunctions: After, Although, As, Because, Before, If, Since, That, Though, Until, Unless, When, Where, While

Since he wants to stay fit, Mark exercises every day.

Dep. Clause

In order to stay fit, Mark exercises every day.

Phrase

Quotations

Use a comma when you write **words that someone spoke or wrote**:

"I'll have a tall mocha," she said.

She said, "I'll have a tall mocha."

"It is important to remember that we all have magic inside us," writes J.K. Rowling.

J.K. Rowling writes, "It is important to remember that we all have magic inside us."

"It is important to remember," writes J.K. Rowling, "that we all have magic inside us."

ADVANCED COMMAS

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Conjunctive Adverbs

Use one or two commas to separate a **conjunctive adverb** from the rest of the sentence.

Conjunctive Adverbs: However, Therefore, Consequently, Furthermore, Nevertheless, Hence, Accordingly, Moreover

Consequently, Miss America will relinquish her crown effective immediately.
The Miss America crown, *therefore*, will go to the first runner up.
The former Miss America will keep her bouquet of roses, *however*.

Coordinate Adjectives

Use a comma between **adjectives that are coordinate**. An adjective is a word that modifies a noun or pronoun. Adjectives are common, but it is rare for them to be coordinate. There are **two tests** you can use to determine if adjectives are coordinate: reverse them or say the word *and* in between them.

The dog had tangled, dirty fur.

The words tangled and dirty are both adjectives describing the fur. These adjectives are coordinate because if you reverse them or say *and* in between them, the sentence sounds okay.

The dog had *dirty, tangled* fur.
The dog had *tangled and dirty* fur.

Most of the time, adjectives will not be coordinate:

He wore a new blue suit.

The words new and blue are adjectives describing the suit, but they don't pass the two tests:

He wore a *blue new* suit.
He wore a *new and blue* suit.

These sentences sound funny. The adjectives are not coordinate, so no comma is needed.

Non-Essential Material

Use two commas to separate **something extra in the middle of the sentence**. *Extra* means that those words could be taken out and the sentence would still be okay and have the same meaning.

Mr. Davis, *my math teacher*, uses his tie to draw circles on the board.
Domesticated dogs, *which are descended from wolves*, are good family pets.

The words in italics are extra. If we remove them, the sentence has the same meaning. So commas are needed around these words.

Kids *who watch TV all day* are lazy.
Dogs *that bark all night long* drive me crazy.

These italicized words are not extra. If we remove them, we will change the meaning of the sentence. No commas should be used around these words.

Another thing to consider when you are looking at something extra in the middle of a sentence is how you want the sentence to **sound**.

Jennifer has a *red* car.

The word *red* is extra, but should you put commas around it? No. Commas tell the reader to pause. Pausing before and after the word *red* would sound funny.

Jennifer has a . . . RED . . . car.

So before you put commas around something extra in the middle of a sentence, make sure it really is extra and that you want the sound of commas in the sentence.