

# Commas

A comma is used to separate words or groups of words so that the meaning of a sentence is clear.

## Rule #1: Items in a series

Use commas to separate items in a series. *There need to be at least three items.* Words, phrases, and clauses in a series are separated by commas to show the reader where one item in the series ends and the next item begins.

Words in a series: *Tobacco, hammock, canoe, and moccasin* are four of the words that English-speaking people owe to Native Americans.

Phrases in a series: *Tightening the spokes, checking the tire pressure, and oiling the gears,* Carlos prepared his bike for the race.

Clauses in a series: *We didn't know where we were going, how we would get there, or when we would arrive.*

## Rule #2: Two or more adjectives that come before a noun

Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives that come before noun.

- \* An Arabian horse is a fast, beautiful animal.
- \* Many ranchers depend on the small, tough, sure-footed Mustang.

**NOTE: There is no comma between the last adjective and the noun being described:**

- \* An Arabian horse is a fast, beautiful, animal. INCORRECT!
- \* Many ranchers depend on the small, tough, sure-footed, Mustang. INCORRECT!

## Rule #3: Compound sentences

Use a comma before FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) when they join TWO COMPLETE SENTENCES ONLY!

- \* We went to Cedar Point last week, and I was glad to see that the attendance in the park was very low.
- \* It was difficult to come back from summer vacation, but I was happy to see all of my friends when I returned.

**\*\*\* DO NOT BE FOOLED BY A SIMPLE SENTENCE WITH A COMPOUND (double) VERB! \*\*\***

- \* We went to the store, and tried on new clothes. INCORRECT!
- \* My family traveled to the Grand Canyon, and saw the Colorado River. INCORRECT!
- \* The hockey player skated toward the net, but didn't score a goal. INCORRECT!
- \* The children wanted to go outside for recess, but could not because it rained. INCORRECT!

**You will NEVER need a comma after the conjunction *because*.**

- \* We went to the store because, we needed new clothes. INCORRECT!
- \* The children wanted to go outside because, they were very hyper. INCORRECT!

## Rule #4: Use commas to set off an expression that interrupts a sentence. (These are called nonessential phrases since they don't change the meaning of the core sentence.)

- \* Putting their things in their lockers, the kids got ready for class.
- \* Harvard College, founded in 1636, is the oldest college in the United States.
- \* Wayne Gretzky, who retired from professional hockey in 1999, held forty regular-season records.

**NOTE: Do NOT set off *essential phrases* since they are important to the meaning of the sentence:**

- \* All farmers growing the new hybrid corn should have a good harvest. (which farmers?)
- \* The discoveries made by Einstein have changed the way people think about the universe. (which discoveries?)
- \* People who own pets live longer and happier lives. (which people?)
- \* National Hockey League players that have competed for ten years or more are very rare. (which players?)

**Rule #5: Use commas to set off an appositive phrase that is nonessential.** (nonessential means that it's not needed for the core sentence to make sense)

- \* The doorman, Sandy McSouthers, parked Judge Ford's maroon Mercedes.
- \* Grace Wexler, the interior decorator for Sunset Towers, surveyed the room carefully.

**Rule #6: Use commas to set off words used in direct address.** (direct address means speaking to someone)

- \* Jim, are you going to the movies with us?
- \* Are you hungry, Jan, or have you have lunch?
- \* I don't think that's true, Kim.

**Rule #7: Use commas to set off a parenthetical expression.** (a parenthetical expression is a side remark that adds information or relates ideas)

- \* In my opinion, there should be twenty more days in the average school year.
- \* Students, of course, don't agree with my opinion.
- \* People, it seems, cannot live without their cell phones.
- \* There are a number of people, however, who are making a real effort to "unplug".

- Common parenthetical phrases:
  - after all
  - as a matter of fact
  - as a rule
  - at any rate
  - by the way
  - however
  - I assure you
  - as a consequence
  - as a result
  - believe me
  - for example
  - I am sure
  - I believe

## Introductory words, phrases, and clauses

**Rule #8: Use a comma after *yes*, *no*, or any mild exclamations such as *well* or *why* at the beginning of a sentence.**

- \* Yes, I'd love another slice of pie.
- \* No, I can't lend you ten dollars.
- \* Well, things could be worse!
- \* So, what are we going to do today?
- \* Um, I don't think that's a great idea.
- \* Hey, we can go later.
- \* Yeah, we heard that, too.

**Rule #9: Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause.**

Since last year, temperatures across the state have been unseasonably high.  
As vacation approached, the students became more and more excited.  
Battered by fierce winds, North Carolina endured the hurricane's wrath.  
To become an Eagle Scout, one must have great determination.  
When the bus arrived, the people at the stop got on.  
If it doesn't rain tomorrow, we will go to the amusement park.  
While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.  
Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.  
If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.  
When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

**Rule #10: Use commas to separate a series of days, dates, and years.**

- \* The Smashing Pumpkins' first concert ever was on Wednesday, October 5, 1988, at the Cabaret Metro in Chicago.
- \* The delegates to the Constitutional Convention signed the Constitution on Monday, September 17, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- \* On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first human to step on the moon.
- \* The Beatles arrived in America on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1964, at John F. Kennedy Airport.

**Rule #11: Use commas to separate elements in addresses.**

- \* Their house was located on 15 West Lincoln Street, Baltimore, Maryland.
- \* That house on Lincoln Street in Baltimore, Maryland, was spacious and beautiful.
- \* People that live in Cleveland, Ohio, have to endure long, gray winters.

## Very common multiple-rule situations

**Rule #7: Use commas to set off a parenthetical expression PLUS**

**Rule #6: Use commas to set off words used in direct address.**

- \* In my opinion, Sally, you use too much frosting on your cakes.
- \* Of course, Spencer, I disagree with your opinion.

**Rule #9: Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause PLUS**

**Rule #6: Use commas to set off words used in direct address.**

- \* When we get to the park, Mark, you are in charge of grilling the hot dogs.
- \* If your behavior doesn't improve, Carrie, I'm sending you to the office.
- \* To be considered for the team, Stephen, you need to be in top shape for tryouts.

**Rule #8: Use a comma after *yes*, *no*, or any mild exclamations such as *well* or *why* at the beginning of a sentence PLUS**

**Rule #6: Use commas to set off words used in direct address.**

- \* Well, Francis, what should we do next?
- \* Oh, Sammy, I didn't see you come in.
- \* Hey, Greg, did you call me last night?
- \* So, Brenda, where are you going for vacation this year?
- \* Well, Harry, that's not technically correct.

\* **Formatting note:** When using commas while typing, always hit the "spacebar" after each comma. There should *never* be a space before and after a comma.

Incorrect: Roses,carnations,and other flowers were for sale.

Incorrect: Roses , carnations , and other flowers were for sale.

Correct: Roses, carnations, and other flowers were for sale.