

## Comma Rules

Commas are necessary for the clear expression of ideas. The comma helps avoid confusion for the reader. But commas don't need to be a source of confusion for the writer because all you need to know are these rules for using commas correctly.

There are 8 rules for the use of the comma. Let's look at them in 3 groups.

### Commas to Separate

#### 1. Use commas to separate items in a series.

- **Words in a series:** *Students will need paper, pens, and calculators.*
- **Phrases in a series:** *The Constitution establishes a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.*
- **Clauses in a series:** *I will go abroad next year if my grades are high enough, if I save enough money, and if my parents agree.*

**Note:** The comma before the "and" is known as the Oxford or serial comma. It is sometimes eliminated if the meaning is clear, but it is usually better to use it to be safe.

#### 2. Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives preceding a noun.

*Grace was an intelligent, studious young woman.*

**Note:** To check, substitute "and" for the comma, and see if it makes sense. For example: *A single electric light bulb lit the hallway.* Comma? Use and. *A single and electric light bulb lit the hallway.* (obviously wrong.) So, no comma: *A single electric light bulb lit the hallway.*

#### 3. Use a comma before and, but, or, nor, for, and yet when they join independent clauses.

*Many people supported the Equal Rights Amendment, but it failed to pass in every state.*

*She worked hard on her grades, and she was admitted into her first-choice school.*

Watch out for these two errors:

- **Comma splice:** If you join the independent clauses with a comma and leave out the and, but, or, nor, for, or yet, you create a comma splice error.  
**Right:** *Anna passed her exams, and the school gave her a scholastic award.*  
**Wrong:** *Anna passed her exams, the school gave her a scholastic award.*
- **Unnecessary comma:** If you are joining two verbs with the same subject, there is no need for a comma.  
*She passed her exams and left on a two-week vacation.* (only one independent clause)

### Commas to Set Off Certain Elements in the Sentence

Sometimes writers refer to these as introducing a "pause." But be careful, not all pauses require a comma.

#### 4. Use a comma to set off nonessential clauses and nonessential participial phrases.

A nonessential clause or phrase is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence.

Compare these examples:

- **Non-essential:** *Anna Nielsen, who lives across the street, works in the library.*
- **Essential:** *All students who are on the rescue squad should report to the lobby.*

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- **Non-essential:** The vase, *wrapped in silk*, arrived today.
- **Essential:** The vase *wrapped carefully in bubble wrap* was not damaged.

**Note:** Remember that when you set off a phrase or clause in the middle of the sentence, you use commas in pairs – at the beginning and the end of the phrase or clause.

## 5. Use a comma after certain introductory elements.

Additional information at the beginning of the sentence is set off by commas.

- **Transition words:** such as *well, yes, no, first, also*, etc.  
*Also, the researchers studied the effect on mice.*
- **An introductory participial phrase:**  
*Tired from her long journey, the pilgrim slept for 12 hours.*
- **A series of prepositional phrases:**  
*After the experiment in controlled conditions, the researchers felt confident of their findings.*
- **An introductory adverb clause:** signaled by *if, since, because, when, although, after*, etc.  
*Although Pip treats him badly, Joe remains loyal to him.*  
*Because the experiment could not be repeated, the researchers are unsure of the findings.*

## 6. Use a comma to set off expressions that interrupt.

- **Appositives and appositive phrases:** These are words or groups of words that describe a noun or pronoun.  
*Mr. Jones, my speech teacher, assigned an impromptu speech for Thursday.*  
*The Scottish Highlands, the setting for the novel Ivanhoe, offer a wild, undisturbed landscape.*
- **Words used in direct address:**  
*Naomi, that is a lovely dress.*  
*Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.*  
*Do you have a statement on the issue, Mr. Alexander?*
- **Parenthetical expressions:** These are expressions that add additional information or an opinion (I believe, on the contrary, in addition, for example, etc.) that is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence.  
*Her argument, in my opinion, has merit.*

## Comma Conventions

### 7. Some conventional situations call for a comma.

- **To separate items in dates and addresses:**  
*On June 4, 2019, we moved to 30 Cross Street, Madison, Wisconsin.*  
*Our trip to Taos, New Mexico, was terrific.*
- **After the salutation of a friendly letter or the closing of any letter:**  
*Dear Aunt Helen,*  
*Sincerely yours,*
- **After a name followed by a suffix:**  
*Dr. Harold Bloom, Ph.D.*  
*John Q. Adams, Jr.*

## And now we come to rule eight – the most important rule of all.

### 8. Do not use unnecessary commas!

Too much punctuation is a harder for the reader to follow than too little. Commas are not salt to be sprinkled over your essay. If the situation does not fit any of these 7 rules, you don't need a comma. When in doubt, leave it out!