# A Quick Guide to Commas

Commas perform both a rhetorical and a practical function for writers. A well-placed comma can emphasize a particular point, while a poorly placed comma can disrupt a sentence’s meaning. Commas can prompt the reader to pause, but adding a comma every time you detect a need to pause will likely lead to comma overuse. Commas do not always correspond with a pause, so writers should familiarize themselves with the writing conventions for commas. Note that for rhetorical effect, skilled writers often intentionally depart from conventions in their comma usage.

## Commas in Compound Sentences

Compound sentences comprise at least two fully formed ideas that each possess a subject, verb, and complete sense. These ideas could stand as their own independent sentences, but by combining them in a compound sentence, a writer can show more clearly how they relate to each other. When this relationship is obvious, a simple semicolon can be used to join the two ideas. More often, however, the reader will need assistance in determining the relationship between the ideas. To facilitate this understanding, writers can link the ideas using a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or a transitional expression (however, nevertheless, therefore, consequently, thus, overwise, rather, etc.).

1. **Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction that is used to join to complete ideas in a compound sentence.**

She was going to go to sleep, but her friend called.

1. **Place a semicolon before a transitional expression, as well as a comma after that expression, to form a compound sentence.**

Mary was searching for her brother; therefore, she was not home when her mom called.

## Commas after Introductory Elements

For clarity, use a comma to separate introductory words, phrases, or clauses from the rest of the sentence. These introductory elements often tell when, where, how, or why the main action of the sentence occurs.

1. **Place a comma after introductory words, such as *yes,* *no*, *well*, and *first*.**

Yes, I would like to go to the upcoming football game.

1. **Place a comma an after introductory phrase, which is a group of words that can sometimes start with a preposition and can sometimes start with a word formed from a verb.**

To understand the appeal of city life, one should visit Boston or Chicago.

In my opinion, the best hamburgers are those made at home on a grill.

Having finished her draft, the student booked an appointment with the University Writing Center.

1. **Place a comma after an introductory dependent clause, which is a group of words that has a subject and a verb but does not convey complete sense. These clauses often begin with words such as *although*, *when*, *because*, *if*, *after*, *as*, *before*, *since*, *unless*, or *while*.**

Although I hated carrots, I ate them for the carotene.

## Commas around Interrupting Elements

Words, phrases, and clauses that interrupt the flow of a sentence should be set off by commas. Such elements add extra information to the sentence but are not essential to its meaning.

1. **A nonessential word can be moved to another part of the sentence without significantly altering the overall meaning. Such a word should be separated by commas.**

The doctor has, however, drawn several conclusions from this current round of tests.

1. **A nonessential phrase often follows a noun and gives more information about that noun. It should be set off with commas from the rest of the sentence.**

Bob, a recent college graduate, was applying for a job as a teacher.

1. **A nonessential clause can be removed from the sentence without fundamentally changing the sentence’s meaning. Surround such a clause with commas.**

Nancy was, as her mother often said, very stubborn.

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| \*CAUTION:  **Be careful to distinguish between nonessential elements, which are set off by commas, and essential words, phrases, and clauses. Removing essential elements will alter the meaning of the sentence, making it too general or even incomplete. Clauses that begin with the word *that* are usually essential.**   1. Did you return the library book that was overdue? 2. Birds who can fly go south for the winter.\*   \*The clause “who can fly” is essential because removing it would suggest that chickens and ostriches also go south for the winter, which isn’t the case. |

## Commas in Lists and Series

1. **Use commas to separate three or more items in a list.**

George read a book, ate pizza, watched TV, and went to bed.

1. **If the listed items already include commas, use semicolons instead to separate the listed items.**

Among the travel agent’s favorite destinations are Paris, France; Bangkok, Thailand; and Lima, Peru.

## Commas with Adjectives

1. **Use commas between adjectives when they are of equal weight, meaning they modify the noun in the same way.**

Kelly is a smart, funny friend.

1. **Try mentally inserting the word *and* in place of the comma to see if the adjectives are modifying equally.**

Correct: Incorrect:

She has two hilarious dogs. BUT She has two, hilarious dogs.

Because you cannot add “and” between the adjectives. “She has two and hilarious dogs” makes no sense.

**For more information,** see Harris, Muriel. “Commas.” *Prentice Hall Refernce Guide to Grammar and Usage*, Prentice Hall, 2000, pp. 127-42.