

Campus Academic Resource Program

Comma Usage

This handout will:

- Demonstrate the proper use of commas in written English
- Demonstrate common errors that happen when using commas
- Provide an exercise to practice proper comma usage

Introduction

Commas are a form of punctuation. Commas help your reader figure out which words go together in a sentence and which parts of your sentences are most important. Commas separate structural elements of sentences. To best understand commas, we should first look at where and how they are used in a sentence.

When To Use Commas:

1. To separate two independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

Examples:

- The receptionist suffered from a sore throat, *but* he stayed at work.
- The dog obviously wanted to play fetch, *yet* her owner didn't recognize this.
- My car was stolen, *so* I filed an insurance claim.

2. After dependent clauses, introductory phrases, or introductory words that precede the main clause.

Examples:

Dependent Clauses: These clauses depend on the rest of the sentence to create a complete sentence and cannot exist on their own. The dependent clauses are italicized in the following examples.

- *While I was trying to study*, my upstairs neighbor was hosting a frat party.
- *Because I ate too much food*, I could barely move.
- *If you weren't planning to show up*, you should have told me.

Introductory Phrases: These are phrases that introduce the rest of the sentence. Most often, they are at the beginning of the sentence introducing an independent clause (or part of the sentence that contains the subject and the verb). The introductory phrases are italicized below.

- *Having no money and no prospects*, he slunk home to drink away his sorrows.
- *Outside the window*, I could see the parade.
- *After a week of rain*, the sky was sharp and clear and bluer than normal.

Introductory Words: These are words that introduce the rest of the sentence. They occur most often at the beginning of the sentence, and introduce the independent clause (or part of the sentence that contains the subject and the verb). The introductory words are italicized below.

- *Yes*, he punched me.
- *Well*, I thought that's what happened.
- *However*, it could have happened some other way.

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3. To bracket clauses or words that provide non-essential information.

Examples:

Clauses:

- My uncle, *who runs marathons*, writes advertising jingles for cereal companies.
 - “Who runs marathons” is considered an appositive because it gives more information about “my uncle.” An **appositive** is a phrase that clarifies the noun in front of it. Appositives have a comma placed before they appear, as well after the phrase is complete.
- The movie, *in my opinion*, lacked any redeeming qualities.
 - While “in my opinion” is between two commas, it is not an appositive because it does not provide clarification to the noun in front of it. Instead, it provides non-essential information.

Words:

- The mountains, *therefore*, symbolize Hemingway’s fantasy of solace.

4. To separate three or more clauses, phrases, or words written in a series (e.g. a list).

Examples:

Clauses:

- *He jumped the fence, sprinted through the backyard, and then vaulted over the gully into the briar patch.*

Phrases:

- The girl across the street likes to *jump rope, draw chalk pictures on the sidewalk, and ride her bike.*

Words:

- When he returned home from the store, Chuck realized that he had forgotten to buy *milk, toilet paper, and marshmallows.*

5. To separate two or more adjectives that describe the same noun.

Examples:

- Mary is a *shy, introverted* child.
 - If we say “Mary is shy and introverted”, the adjectives would describe Mary, when in the above sentence “shy, introverted” describes the kind of child she is.
- My aunt bought an *energetic, nervous* dog.
- The fire truck was a *large, red* one.

6. At the end of a sentence to indicate a distinct pause or shift.

Examples:

- He was *content*, not overjoyed.
- The dog looked *thoughtful*, almost human.
- You’re a *fisherman*, aren’t you?
 - All of these comma uses represent a change in tone or content.

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7. To set off a phrase at the end of a sentence that refers back to the beginning or middle of that sentence.

Examples:

- The crazed motorist sped away, *cackling maniacally*.
- The lobster scuttled away from the waiter, *brandishing its claws*.

8. When introducing a quotation.

If the quotation is at the beginning of the sentence, the comma will go after the quotation. If the quotation is in the middle or end of the sentence, the comma will go before the quotation.

Examples:

- Chuck ate the last slice of pizza then *asked*, “Was that mine or yours?”
- Later on that day Sally *asked*, “Do you want to go to the dance with me?”
- “Thank you so much for this Snuggie,” *said* John to his Grandma.

9. To set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

Examples:

- *Sacramento, California*, is the state capitol.
- November 4, 2016, is election day
- The election will determine who lives at 1600 *Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC*.
- *Mark Paulsen, MD*, is my doctor.

For more tips on how to properly use commas in a sentence, see the Run-Ons And Fragments handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>

Errors In Comma Usage

1. Comma Splice

Comma splices are similar to run-on sentences because they also incorrectly connect independent clauses. A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are connected with only a comma. There are a few different ways to correct a comma splice. Consider the following sentence and the revised versions that follow it.

Examples:

My family bakes together nearly every night, we then get to enjoy everything we make together.

Correction #1

My family bakes together nearly every night, We then get to enjoy everything we make together.

- The comma splice has been corrected by breaking the sentence into two separate sentences.

Correction #2

My family bakes together nearly every night, **and** we then get to enjoy everything we make together.

- The comma splice has been corrected by adding a coordinating conjunction and a comma.

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Correction #3

After my family bakes together nearly every night, **we** get to enjoy everything we make together.

- The comma splice has been corrected by adding a subordinating conjunction and a comma.
- The “after” at the beginning of the sentence indicates “when”, and we are able to remove the word ‘then’ from the original sentence.

2. Oxford Comma vs Standard Comma

The “Oxford Comma” is a convention of English Writing wherein a comma is placed before a coordinating conjunction in a list.

Example of “Standard Comma”:

Lucy owns a blue coat, *grey pants and red shoes.*

- There is no comma after “grey pants” and before the conjunction “and.”

Example of “Oxford Comma”:

Lucy owns a blue coat, *grey pants, and red shoes.*

- There is a comma after “grey pants” and before the conjunction “and.”

While the use of the “Standard Comma” is not technically an error in comma usage, it can contribute to confusion and ambiguity when used instead of the “Oxford Comma.” An example of this type of confusion is below:

Example:

The shirt is available in blue, orange, grey, *yellow and pink.*

- In the above sentence, it is easy to confuse whether or not the author of this sentence meant that the available colors were: blue, orange, grey, yellow, and pink OR blue, orange, grey, and **yellow and pink**. It might be difficult to determine whether the item after the last comma is one entity or two.

Exercise

For this exercise, read the following sentences and punctuate them by placing commas in the right places. In the line below each sentence, specify which rule(s) you used to fix the comma problem.

1. Because Mitch fell off his bike he twisted his ankle badly.

2. The cat was seeking affection but she couldn't catch her owner's attention.

3. In the kitchen Louisa was burning their dinner.

4. Seattle Washington is a rainy city.

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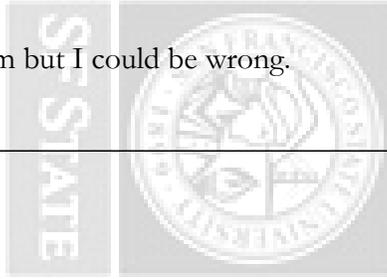
5. Well I could have sworn I saw him but I could be wrong.

6. Doug is a mean spiteful man.

7. My new car according to my father is fancy expensive and impractical.

8. After tucking me in at night my mom always said “Sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

9. The salesman was aggressive practically threatening.



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Answer Key

1. Because Mitch fell off his bike, he twisted his ankle badly.

RULE 2a

2. The cat was seeking affection, but she couldn't catch her owner's attention.

RULE 1

3. In the kitchen, Louisa was burning their dinner.

RULE 2b

4. Seattle, Washington, is a rainy city.

RULE 8

5. Well, I could have sworn I saw him, but I could be wrong.

RULE 2c

RULE 1

6. Doug is a mean, spiteful man.

RULE 5

7. My new car, according to my father, is fancy, expensive, and impractical.

RULE 3b

RULE 4a

8. After tucking me in at night, my mom always said, "Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

RULE 2b

RULE 9

9. The salesman was aggressive, practically threatening.

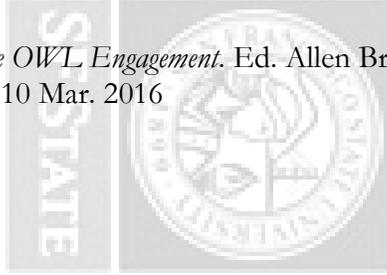
RULE 7

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Works Cited

Wells, Jaclyn M. "Comma Splices." *Purdue OWL Engagement*. Ed. Allen Brizee. Purdue Online Writing Lab, 07 Aug. 2009. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.



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