Commas
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Commas are used mainly to group words or phrases together in a sentence. Commas matter because without them, many sentences would be confusing. A comma can join, separate, or disrupt, meaning they are often easy to misuse. More common uses include combining information using a conjunction, using introductory elements, setting off nonessential elements, separating items in a series, and supplementing quotations. Commas can play many roles in a sentence meaning it requires you to make decisions based on audience, purpose, rhythm, and style as much as grammar.

**Common Comma Challenges**
As mentioned in the introduction, commas are one of the most misused devices in writing. Below are three common errors related to comma usage.

**Comma Splices**
Comma splices are the most frequent comma sin. A comma splice is when you join together two independent clauses, meaning two complete sentences, with a comma. In the following example, notice how what is on both sides of the comma could stand on its own as a complete sentence.

- **Incorrect:** When I go to the tutorial center my writing improves, I don’t go there enough.

Most likely you are trying to keep two related thoughts together; however, a comma cannot do this alone.

**There are four ways that you might think about correcting comma splices.**

1. **Use a conjunction after the comma**
   - Example: When I go to the tutorial center my writing improves, **but** I don’t go there enough.

2. **Use a semicolon (;) instead of a comma**
   - Example: When I go to the tutorial center my writing improves; I don’t go there enough.

3. **Use a comma with a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb**
   - Example: When I go to the tutorial center my writing improves; **however,** I don’t go there enough.

4. **Use a period instead of a comma, making two sentences**
   - Example: When I go to the tutorial center my writing improves. I don’t go there enough.

**Disruptive Commas between Verbs and Objects**
A comma should not separate a verb and its direct or indirect object.

- **Incorrect:** I went, to the beach.
- **Correct:** I went to the beach.
  - The verb *went* has to be connected to an object, which in this case is *the beach.*

- **Incorrect:** As a grammarian, I should have given, you better sample sentences.
- **Correct:** As a grammarian, I should have given you better sample sentences.
  - Same idea here, but with a more complex sentence. *Should have given* is the verb and needs to be connected to its direct object, *sentences,* and indirect object, *you.*

Notice how the commas disrupt meaning and are very choppy. Additionally, the reader would be confused about what is receiving the action (the object) since this is separated from the verb with a comma.
**Disruptive Commas between Subjects and Verbs**

A comma should not separate a subject and verb.

- **Incorrect**: The energetic gerbil, jumped on the ledge.
- **Correct**: The energetic gerbil jumped on the ledge.
  - Without the verb *jumped*, it’s unclear what the subject, *gerbil*, is doing. The comma disrupts these two elements of the sentence.

- **Incorrect**: The couple, bought a fish and a pair of gerbils.
- **Correct**: The couple bought a fish and a pair of gerbils.
  - *Bought*, the verb, explains what the *couple*, the subject, has done. These two sentence elements need to be linked and the disruptive comma needs to be removed.

These commas tend to disrupt a sentence and render them choppy. It is also confusing for readers because they wouldn’t immediately understand how you are putting together sentences, specifically what relationship exists between your subject and verb.

**How and When to Use Commas**

**Commas in Compound Sentences**

In the acronym **FANBOYS**, created from seven conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*), each conjunction requires a comma in specific situations. These commas are necessary when linking two independent clauses (or complete sentences) with FANBOYS. When a coordinating conjunction combines these two independent clauses, place a comma before the conjunction.

- **Example**: Marissa volunteers every Saturday, **but** she never goes to soup kitchens because of her food allergies.
- **Example**: Lorenzo made a clay sculpture earlier, **so** he had to change clothes.

Sometimes in short sentences, writers decide to leave out the comma before the conjunction. You will never be wrong should you decide to use the comma, meaning both examples below are correct.

- **Correct**: She was wrong **and** she knew it.
- **Correct**: She was wrong, **and** she knew it.

If the sentence is long and complex with several commas already used, you might be best served using a semicolon before the conjunction instead.

- **Example**: I am having a tough time deciding whether I want to major in English, history, or psychology; but while my family continues to pressure me to make a choice, my friend, Jacky, has already declared her major as sociology with a minor in psychology.

**Misusing Commas with FANBOYS**

*Do not* place a comma after a conjunction. To fix these two examples, the commas after the conjunctions *so* and *but* would be removed.

- **Incorrect**: So, the dish ran away with the spoon.
- **Incorrect**: My job title sounds impressive, but, crockery cleansing operative is just another name for dishwasher.
Do not separate information that belongs together with a comma. An easy way to fix these errors is to read through your paper and make sure what is on each side of the conjunction is a complete sentence.

- **Incorrect**: Both the tables, and the desks need to be moved.
  - In this example, the tables and the desks are a unit of meaning that shouldn’t be separated by a comma.
- **Incorrect**: The shoes by the door, and the boots in the living room need to be put away.
  - This example has both the shoes and the boots that should not be separated.

Notice how the comma is disruptive in both examples and that in each sentence what is on each side of the comma does not add up to an independent clause.

**Commas after Introductory Elements**

Commas should be used after introductory words, expressions, phrases, or clauses.

- **Example**: After the party, we sat on the beach.
- **Example**: Moreover, our next item to discuss is in the emailed agenda.

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, meaning it depends on the rest of the sentence for full meaning, then it will require a comma.

- **Example**: In the event of failure, we can always try again next year.
  - If the sentence only said, In the event of failure, you might be wondering what would happen in the event of failure. The sentence depends on the independent clause for full meaning.

Commas can be omitted after short introductory elements if there is no risk of misunderstanding from the reader. However, you will never be wrong to include a comma after an introductory clause, phrase, or word, meaning both examples below are correct.

- **Correct**: In the 1990s the U.S. was prosperous.
- **Correct**: In the 1990s, the U.S. was prosperous.

Commas should be used after conjunctive adverbs, which are words used to connect and clarify words and ideas in a sentence. When connecting two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb, a semicolon (;) is required.

- **Example**: I enjoy swimming; however, volleyball is my favorite sport.

Listed below are some common conjunctive adverbs:

- Accordingly
- Also
- Furthermore
- However
- Meanwhile
- Nonetheless
- Regardless
- Therefore
- Thus
- Yet

**Commas with Nonessential Elements**

**Appositives**: Appositives rename a preceding noun phrase. These phrases can be both essential and nonessential. Both are examined below.

- **Essential Appositives**: When it identifies, or specifies, the noun phrase, it is essential and is not set off by commas.
• **Example:** *The Greek God* Zeus was an inhabitant of Mount Olympus.
  o *The Greek God* is the noun phrase and *Zeus* is the essential appositive. Zeus is an essential appositive because it distinguishes a specific Greek God from all the others.

Nonessential Appositives: When the appositive adds information, but doesn’t identify or specify, it is considered nonessential and is set off from the rest of the sentence with commas.

• **Example:** *The king of the Greek Gods*, Zeus, was an inhabitant of Mount Olympus.
  o *The king of the Greek Gods* is the noun phrase and *Zeus* is the nonessential appositive. Since there was only one king of the Greek Gods, the name Zeus is considered nonessential.

Nonrestrictive elements: Here you’re trying to figure out how the information modifies the sentence. A good strategy is to see if you can remove the information and still retain the same meaning. If so, then the information is considered nonessential. A comma goes before and after the nonessential information.

• **Example:** The band, which performs in dive bars, has received rave reviews.
• **Example:** J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, which was originally written only for his children, was published in 1937 to critical acclaim.
• **Example:** So, in other news, I had French fries for lunch.

Restrictive elements: Here, you’re dealing with information necessary to the sentence. *Do not* use commas with restrictive elements (necessary information) in a sentence.

• **Incorrect:** The lecturer, who is always late to class, wore a yellow tie.
• **Correct:** The lecturer who is always late to class wore a yellow tie.
  o Since there are multiple lecturers, the information about tardiness tells the reader which one.

• **Incorrect:** All children, fed fresh fruits and vegetables, are healthier.
• **Correct:** All children fed fresh fruits and vegetables are healthier.
  o There are many children who might be considered healthy. The information about fresh fruits and vegetables tells the reader about specific children.

Commas to Separate Items in a Series
Listing items: When listing three or more items use a comma in between each item.

• **Example:** Your breakfast comes with a side of eggs, hash browns, or bacon.
• **Example:** The WHO recommends that all children receive certain vaccines for diseases including measles, rubella, polio, tetanus, and rotavirus.
  o The comma before the coordinating conjunction *(or and and in the above examples)* is known as an Oxford Comma. Some writers choose to omit this comma. Check a style guide to see if you should include or omit these commas, specifically with AP Style and British English dialects.

If there are only two items in a series, no comma is needed

• **Incorrect:** The food was colorful, and bland.
• **Correct:** The food was colorful and bland.
If items in a series are long or contain internal commas, semicolons may be used for clarity.

- **Example:** Some English Departments offer doctoral programs in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media; Technical Communication; Second Language Studies; and Literature.

**Coordinate Adjectives:** Coordinate adjectives each modify the noun or pronoun they precede and are of equal weight. The order of these descriptive words is not important. Notice in the example below *thick, ugly, and yellow* each describe the sludge but could be rearranged and still retain the same meaning.

- **Example:** The *thick, ugly, yellow* sludge emerged from the kitchen sink.

**Cumulative Adjectives:** Cumulative adjectives modify not only the noun or pronoun they precede but also the next adjective in the series, meaning order matters. An easy way to tell if you’re working with a cumulative adjective is to attempt to switch the order and see if the sentence still makes sense.

- **Example:** The *enormous shoulder* bag kept slipping off her shoulder and hitting my hand.
- *Enormous* and *shoulder* cannot be switched or else the sentence would read *The shoulder enormous*, which does not offer the same meaning.

**Commas with Quotations and Dialogue**

**Direct Quotation:** In most cases, you will separate a direct quotation from a signal phrase with a comma.

- **Example:** As he clung to the wreckage of the Titanic alongside Rose, Jack promised, “I’ll never let go.”

**Exceptions for Direct Quotations:** There are a few exceptions to this rule.

When a quotation begins a sentence that ends with a question mark or exclamation point, there is no need for a comma.

- **Example:** “Judge me by my size, do you?” Yoda asks before explaining the power of the Force.

When the quotation is integrated into the sentence, you can omit the comma.

- **Example:** In *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*, Kingsley Shacklebolt explains that the Order of the Phoenix values equity since “every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.”

When you have a signal phrase that is a complete sentence and makes sense without the quotation, use a colon.

- **Example:** Samwise Gamgee continues to play a pivotal role in *The Two Towers*, inspiring Frodo to not give up: “There’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for.”

**Indirect Quotation:** These quotations do not need commas.

- Jack and Rose were floating in the water as the Titanic sank when Jack said he would never let Rose go.

Works Consulted: