

MAKING SENSE OF COMMAS



A comma is a form of punctuation used to separate distinct elements in a sentence, including **listed items**, **dependent** and **independent clauses**, **transition words** and **phrases**, and **non-essential information**.



Commas in a List

Use commas to separate items in lists of **three or more items**.

e.g., I'm studying Italian, Computer Science, Statistics, and Functions.

Commas and Introductory Phrases

Commas are used after **short introductory phrases**. A comma indicates that the introductory information is over and the main part of the sentence is beginning. Introductory phrases may include context about **times** or **dates**. They may also be **transition words** or **phrases**.

e.g., In 1949, Newfoundland joined Confederation.

e.g., However, many citizens remained loyal to the idea of independence.

Aa

Use two commas for **transition words** used in the middle of sentence.

e.g., Most of Smith's conclusions, however, are valid.

Commas and Coordinating Conjunctions

Commas generally come before **coordinating conjunctions** that join independent clauses.

e.g., I was failing calculus, so my parents hired a tutor.

e.g., Students today must be better prepared than ever, for competition in the workplace is fierce.

Aa

The coordinating conjunctions can be remembered through the acronym F.A.N.B.O.Y.S.:

F (for) **A** (and) **N** (nor) **B** (but) **O** (or) **Y** (yet) **S** (so)

Commas and Parenthetical Expressions

A parenthetical expression adds **secondary** or **supplemental information** to a sentence. Placing commas around this information indicates that the information is **non-essential** from a grammatical standpoint and could be removed without interfering with the overall meaning or structural completeness of the sentence.

e.g., My PSYCH 345C textbook, which costs over \$175, is difficult to understand.

e.g., Marjorie, Don's wife of thirty years, planned a surprise party for his 75th birthday.

Aa

Commas used for parenthetical expressions can also be replaced by **dashes** or, occasionally, **parentheses**.



While the guidelines in this handout are designed to help you understand and use commas correctly, it is important to note that there will be exceptions to these rules for **stylistic** or **flow** purposes. For example, the following sentence is grammatically correct based on comma rules, but it has so many commas in a short space that the sentence may appear disjointed:

e.g., She should be here at 9, but, if not, we can start anyway.

The above sentence might be written to omit the second comma. Be careful, since some people may judge this as grammatically incorrect. However, it is a common construction when a parenthetical expression (*if not*) directly follows a coordinating conjunction (*but*):

e.g., She should be here at 9, but if not, we can start anyway.

Commas and Complex Sentences

Complex sentences are ones that contain **one independent clause** (complete sentence) and **one or more dependent clauses**. Whether or not you use a comma depends on the **order** in which the clauses are presented.

- 1 Dependent clause
- 2 Independent clause

Use a comma when a dependent clause is followed by an independent clause.

e.g., Because the course was so popular¹, the department decided to run extra sections in the fall².

Do not use a comma when an independent clause is followed by a dependent clause.

e.g., The department decided to run extra sections of the course in the fall² because it was so popular¹.