

# 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.*

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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.*

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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 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

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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 popular<sup>1</sup>, the department decided to run extra sections in the fall<sup>2</sup>.*

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 fall<sup>2</sup> because it was so popular<sup>1</sup>.*