

Commas I: Basic Usage

Just as pauses or variations in voice help to convey the meaning of spoken sentences, commas help to clarify the meaning of written sentences. Commas are used both to separate and to enclose elements of the sentence.

COMMAS TO SEPARATE

- Use commas before coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when they join independent clauses.

I knew he was angry, for he stamped out of the room.

Everyone was talking, so no one hear the bell.

- Use commas to separate the items in a series of three or more words or phrases.

The air was raw, dank, and gray.

I told him how to dress, what to carry, and which way to go.

- Use commas between coordinating adjectives.

A.) If the insertion of “and” between the adjective makes sense, do

Not use a comma.

B.) If the adjective sounds natural in reverse order, use a comma

C.) If the noun requires an explanatory modifier, do not invert

order, and use a comma

Comma: a dark, stormy night

Yes: a dark and stormy night

Yes: a stormy, dark night

No comma: a difficult midterm exam

No: a difficult and midterm exam

No: a midterm and difficult exam

- Use comma after the following introductory words, phrases, and clauses.

A.) Introductory adverbial clauses:

When the sun shines, the woman is happy.

B.) Introductory verbal phrases:

Having climbed to the top of the mountain, Veronica decided

To photograph the view

C.) Transitional expressions, injections, and absolutes:

No, we are not in danger.

In fact, I'll even stop by.

NOTE: Do NOT use commas after short prepositional phrases:

In the basket were tiny kittens.

- Use commas between any two words that might be mistakenly read together.

A.) Ever since, he has been afraid of water (Not: ever since he had been afraid)

B.) Once inside, the dog scampered all over the furniture. (Not:
once inside the dog)

EXERCISE A

Directions: Insert commas where needed to separate independent causes, items in a series, coordinating adjectives, or introductory words, phrases or clauses.

1. We asked Marion to come with us but she had another engagement.
2. The lights the movement and the presents make a pretty picture.
3. We finally decided to stay overnight for the snowfall had turned into a blizzard.
4. The officer asked for Bob's license looked it over and got out his notebook.
5. The doctor must come soon or he will be too late.
6. Having finished the book she turned off the light and went to sleep.
7. Three trucks four cars and a trailer were tangled on the icy bridge.
8. Bill found the geology course interesting practical but difficult.
9. The boss frowned tried to look severe and finally grinned.
10. Yes I think I can go.

11. To unlock the door turn the key all the way to the left.
12. If it rains tomorrow I will never wear my new boots.
13. Over the hill was our camp.
14. Walking to school I saw Mr. Harris.
15. Nevertheless he kept trying.
16. The blue shimmering sea stretched out before us.
17. Take the first four-lane road.
18. Well this is it.
19. After he ate dinner he washed the dishes.
20. The spry old lady got there first.

Answers on last Page

COMMAS TO ENCLOSE

Commas are used to set off words, phrases, or clauses that break into the normal word order of a sentence. Note that the enclosed material may be removed without changing the grammatical structure of the sentence.

- Use commas to enclose nonrestrictive clauses or phrases.

My father, hoping for more detailed information, wrote the secretary.

My only brother, who lives in Cleveland, is a chemist.

- Use commas to enclose appositives.

Ms. McClure, our science teacher, told me about it.

The colonel, a friend of many years, advised him to stay

- Use commas to enclose absolute phrases, which consist of noun or pronoun plus a verbal.

The cat being away, the mice will play.

He stood in the doorway, his wet cloak dripping water on the rug, and waited.

- Use commas to enclose Parenthetical expressions or interrupters.

You will find, for example, that the format is not attractive.

The text, moreover, was boring.

- Use commas to set off words of direct address.

Henry, your theme must be rewritten.

- Use commas to distinguish the speaker in direct quotations.

“Where,” she asked, “are you going?”

- Use commas in between degrees, titles, dates, addresses.

Our friend, Dr. Martin, was born on July 14, 1904, in Mayville, Illinois.

SUPERFLUOUS COMMAS

- Do not use a comma to separate the subject from its verb.

Even people with unlisted phone numbers receive prank calls.

- Do not use a comma before a coordinating conjunction linking compound subjects, verbs, or adjectives.

The facts were selected and organized with care.

- Do not use commas to set off very short introductory or parenthetical expressions.

Maybe the battery cables need cleaning.

EXERCISE B

Directions: Insert commas where it is necessary to set off words, phrases or clauses that interrupt the normal word order of the sentence.

1. My favorite flower the hyacinth is too odoriferous for some people.
2. I rode the bus this morning with my car being in the shop.
3. “Once again” said the candidate “I must respond to the call of my people.”
4. My reaction to his speech to be brutally frank was highly unfavorable.

5. My youngest sister who is still in high school hopes to become a doctor.
6. “And now fellow citizens the time for action has arrived” said the mayor.
7. Cape palmetto once a smugglers’ haven has become a tourist center.
8. The once stately mansion alas is in a state of despair.
9. Let us remind you sir that your presence here is unwelcome.
10. 10. The dress slightly faded from repeated washing was still attractive.
11. “I must ask you to repeat your question” said the chairwoman.
12. Its cash reserves running low the corporation applied for a loan.
13. The meal that Mrs. King served pleased Uncle Fred whose appetite is enormous.
14. At Cloverdale our next stop we bought two new tires.
15. “From behind this post I can’t see the stage” complained Ted.
16. The budget for next year I must emphasize will be severely cut.
17. And in conclusion good neighbors I urge you to vote.

18. My landlord who formerly was a mechanic can fix anything.
19. Our little boat having a shallow draft maneuvered over the sandbar.
20. Jan Robinson PH.D. lives at 743 Grand Street Akron North Dakota.

Answers on last page

ADDITIONAL COMMA EXERCISES (C)

Directions: Insert commas where it is necessary to separate or enclose elements of the sentence. Be careful not to add superfluous commas.

1. The plates the cups and the saucers all fell to the floor with a loud crash and Mr. Blaze rushed into the kitchen.
2. Raising hurriedly from their seats the three men walked with quick nervous steps out of the auditorium.
3. We saw the Adams Library one of the oldest in America.
4. There are no doubts my friends that we have hard times ahead of us.
5. The snake coiled swiftly struck with binding speed and grasped the terror-stricken immobilized lizard just behind the head.
6. Before we had gone five miles over the dusty rocky detour two of our tires had become dangerously soft.

7. One field of science electronics is almost completely devoted to storing and transmitting information.
8. The game was played as a matter of fact exactly as we planned it.
9. My brother ordered an omelet a Danish pastry and a cup of coffee but the rest of us did not order anything at all.
10. Instead of leaving the dog returned to the picnic table and ate the cake the ice-cream and all the cookies.
11. Your second sentence for example is much too long.
12. The door was promptly opened by the butler a tall man with brooding eyes.
13. Led by several swift long-legged runners the vast crowd of marathon runners moved up the street and across the bridge.
14. Elaine had once been chased by a snarling vicious dog; ever since she had disturbed pets of all kinds.
15. Although the towns are far apart they nevertheless have similar schools churches and public parks.

Answers on last page

ANSWER KEY

Exercise A

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>us,</i> | 11. <i>door,</i> |
| 2. <i>lights, movement,</i> | 12. <i>tomorrow,</i> |
| 3. <i>overnight,</i> | 13. <i>no comma</i> |
| 4. <i>license, over,</i> | 14. <i>school,</i> |
| 5. <i>soon,</i> | 15. <i>Nevertheless,</i> |
| 6. <i>book,</i> | 16. <i>blue,</i> |
| 7. <i>trucks, cars,</i> | 17. <i>no comma,</i> |
| 8. <i>interesting, practical,</i> | 18. <i>Well,</i> |
| 9. <i>frowned, severe,</i> | 19. <i>dinner,</i> |
| 10. <i>Yes,</i> | 20. <i>no comma</i> |

Exercise B

1. *flower, hyacinth,*

2. *morning,*

3. *again," candidate,"*

4. *speech, frank,*

5. *sister, school,*

6. *now, citizens,*

7. *Palmetto, haven,*

8. *mansion, alas,*

9. *you, sir,*

10. *dress, washing,*

11. *question, "*

12. *low,*

13. *Fred,*

14. *Cloverdale, stop,*

15. *post, stage,"*

16. *year, emphasize,*

17. *conclusion, neighbors,*

18. *landlord, mechanic,*

19. *boat, draft,*

20. *Robinson, Ph.D., Street, Akron,*

Exercise C

1. *cups, crash,*

2. *seats, quick,*

3. *Library,*

4. *doubt, friends,*

5. *swiftly, speed, stricken,*

6. *dusty, detour,*

7. *science, electronics,*

8. *played, fact,*

9. *pastry, coffee,*

10. *leaving, table, ice cream,*

11. *sentence, example,*

12. *butler,*

13. *swift, runners,*

14. *snarling, since,*

15. *apart, nevertheless, churches,*