

Commas

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



Below are some definitions that will help you better understand this handout:

Independent clause: A group of words that **can** stand alone as a complete sentence.

Dependent clause: A group of words that **cannot** stand alone as a complete sentence.

Commas are needed before *coordinating conjunctions* joining *independent clauses* in a sentence

Coordinating Conjunctions:

For
And
Nor
But
Or
Yet
So

Example: Kelsey was having trouble understanding how to properly use commas, so she made an appointment at the Writing Center.

However, a comma is not needed if the sentence does not change meaning when the comma is omitted or if the sentence is short

Example: The Writing Center is open and the wait time is short.

Commas are needed to separate words or phrases within a series or list

Example: Kelsey's favorite things to write about are dragons, magic, and cats.

Example: Kelsey learned about commas, revised her creative writing assignment, and confidently submitted it before the deadline.

However, if there are commas within the items of a series, use a semi-colon

Example: In her creative writing class, Kelsey wrote about a man who sailed across the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the Argentine Sea; a family who adopted a tiny, three-legged cat; and a mysterious, friendly ghost.

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Commas are needed when two or more adjectives are used to modify the same noun

Example: Kelsey’s creative writing professor is a tall, blonde woman named J.K. Rowling. (Both “tall” and “blonde” act independently to modify the noun “woman”).

However, an adjective and a noun can work together to form a new noun, making the comma unneeded

Example: Rowling writes long fiction novels. (“Fiction” combines with “novels” here to create the specific noun “fiction novels.” Now the single adjective “long” is modifying “fiction novels,” so you do not need a comma).

Commas are needed with *nonrestrictive modifiers*

Nonrestrictive Modifiers:

Modifiers, or expressions, that are not essential to the meaning of a sentence.

Example: Kelsey, who is a fan of the *Harry Potter* series, was eager to take a class taught by the famous author. (If “who is a fan of the *Harry Potter* series” was taken out of this sentence, the overall meaning contained within “Kelsey was eager to take a class taught by the famous author” would not be lost)

Commas are needed with *appositives*

Appositive:

A phrase that renames, explains, or identifies the subject of the sentence.
Appositives can contain additional information about the subject.

Example: Kelsey, a graduate student, has to turn in her essay at midnight. (In this case, “a graduate student” renames “Kelsey.”)

Example: Kelsey, a hard-working graduate student, has to turn in her essay at midnight.

Example: Kelsey, a hard-working graduate student who is very tired, has to turn in her essay at midnight.

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Serial or Oxford commas

Oxford Comma:

Commas that are used before the coordinating conjunction in a series.

Example without the oxford comma: Kelsey needed to speak to her professors, the custodian and the landlord. (In this situation, it is unclear if “the professors, the custodian and the landlord” are three distinct groups of people or if the custodian and the landlord are Kelsey’s professors.)

Example with the oxford comma: Kelsey needed to speak to her professors, the custodian, and the landlord. (Now you can say with certainty that these are three groups of people.)

Commas are needed after *introductory clauses*, *introductory phrases*, and *introductory words*

(1) Introductory Clauses:

Dependent clauses that provide background information and start with adverbs like *after*, *although*, *as*, *because*, *before*, *if*, *since*, *though*, *until*, and *when*.

(2) Introductory Phrases:

These do the same thing as introductory clauses, but lack a subject and verb of their own and so are not a clause.

(3) Introductory Words:

Words like *however*, *nonetheless*, *therefore*, *still*, *meanwhile*, and *furthermore*.

(1) Example: After she grabbed her pen and paper, Kelsey prepared to write her entire essay in the two hours before it was due. (Introductory clause is “After she grabbed her pen and paper”. The subject “her” and verb “grabbed” allow this to be a clause, while the adverb “after” makes it introductory.)

(2) Example: Staying focused, Kelsey worked furiously on her essay. (Introductory phrase is “Staying focused”. Because we don’t know who is staying focused until we get to the main clause of the sentence, this can only be a phrase.)

(3) Example: Therefore, Kelsey managed to finish her essay with five minutes to spare. (Introductory word is “therefore.” Sentences with introductory words can be connected to another complete sentence with a semicolon.)