

Help With: Commas



Some amateur writers seem to think sprinkling commas every few words is a good rule, but it makes for difficult reading. A comma is not a pause mark, and unnecessary punctuation slows down and frustrates readers. Here are some guidelines to help writers avoid 'punctuation salad':

- **Lists.** When making a list of more than two things, put a comma after each element, with a conjunction *and* / *or* before the last one:

After the flood there were broken dishes, lost cutlery, and damaged carpets.

Academic manuals insist on this last comma, nicknamed the Oxford comma. Journalists often omit the final comma in order to save column space. This is fine, but be sure that doing so does not make the sentence ambiguous:

This book is dedicated to my friends, Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein.

This is obviously a silly example, but grammatically the meaning could be that my friends *were* Marilyn Monroe and Einstein. Try this instead:

This book is dedicated to my friends, Marilyn Monroe, and Albert Einstein.

- **Introductory phrases or clauses.** Setting off introductory words, phrases, or clauses with a comma lets the reader know that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. No matter what size it is, an introductory bit cannot stand alone as a complete thought:

Generally, extraterrestrials are friendly and helpful.

Moreover, some will knit booties for you if you ask nicely.

Frankly speaking, Godzilla wanted to play the same kinds of roles that Flipper was given.

Dissatisfied with destruction, he was hoping to frolic in the waves with his Hollywood friends.

Don't let a long dependent clause fool you into ending it with a period. It still needs some punctuation to link it to the rest of the sentence.

Because Paradise Lost is concerned with justifying the ways of God to man as its stated goal, Milton must present free will as a good thing.

- **Conjunction sentences:** For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.

My socks smell really bad, so they will be easy to find.

You wore a lovely swimsuit, but you didn't wear anything else.

If the second part of the sentence is not a complete thought, you do not need a comma.

You wore a lovely swimsuit but nothing else.

- **Comma splices.** The rule is simple: Do not connect two complete sentences with a comma.

My hamster loved to play, I gave him a hula-hoop.

You can use a period, semicolon, or conjunction to fix this.

My hamster loved to play. I gave him a hula-hoop.

My hamster loved to play, and so I gave him a hula-hoop.

- **However, therefore, moreover.** When using these words in the middle of a sentence, put a comma *afterwards* only.

Bad: *Basketball is my favorite sport, however pizza eating is where I excel.*

Also bad: *Basketball is my favorite sport, however, pizza eating is where I excel.*

Good: *Basketball is my favorite sport. However, pizza eating is where I excel.*

Good: *Basketball is my favorite sport; however, pizza eating is where I excel.*

- **Interrupters.** Two commas can be used to set off additional information that appears within the sentence. You should be able to take out the section framed by commas and still have a complete and clear sentence.

Bob Mills, a sophomore from Raleigh, was the only North Carolina native at the Japanese food festival.

Alyssa thought she could see the future, not the past, in the wrinkles on her skin.

To see if you need commas around these interrupters, try taking them out of the sentence completely. If it is still clear, then you do not need commas. Remember that if the information is not additional but is essential to the meaning of the sentence you do not use commas.

My sisters, who are engineers, are successful.

My sisters who are engineers are successful. My sisters who are English majors are not.

These sentences aren't the same; the first says that all of my sisters are engineers and are successful (non-restrictive). The second says that only those sisters who are engineers are successful, and those who are not engineers are not successful (restrictive).

- **Common Sense**

Try to learn the rules of usage for commas. But do rely on your common sense. Sometimes the comma is optional in a very short sentence, or it is obvious what is intended.

On Saturday, the office is closed. Or: *On Saturday the office is closed.*

My wife, Maureen, made me lunch today. Or: *My wife Maureen made me lunch today.*

Generally, novice writers err by having too many commas. In these sentences you can safely omit them. The first sentence is short enough to be clear, and the reader can probably guess that you only have one wife.