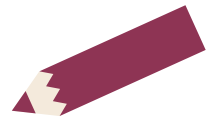


HOW TO USE A COMMA



Lesson Objective

Commas are small, important punctuation marks that are commonly misused. In this lesson, you will learn how to use commas correctly. You'll also learn some common errors that writers make with commas. Let's start by searching for sentences with commas! How many different types of commas can you find?

Warm-Up

A. Writing

Search for three sentences that have at least one comma each. Copy the sentences in the space provided. Search in books or other printed material in your classroom, hallway, or neighborhood.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Compare your commas with the commas your classmates found. Are they used in the same way or in different ways?

Warm-Up cont.

B. Vocabulary Preview

Match the words on the left with the correct meanings on the right.

- | | |
|--|---|
| _____ 1. punctuation | a) necessary, important |
| _____ 2. series | b) specifying (one specific thing or person) |
| _____ 3. conjunction | c) a mark used to make the written word clear to the reader |
| _____ 4. essential | d) part of a sentence that cannot stand alone |
| _____ 5. coordinate (<i>adjective</i>) | e) a part of speech used to join two parts of a sentence |
| _____ 6. restrictive | f) part of a sentence that can stand alone (has a subject and a verb) |
| _____ 7. tag question | g) a question added at the end of a statement for clarification |
| _____ 8. independent clause | h) the first line in a letter that addresses the recipient |
| _____ 9. dependent clause | i) going together, being equal |
| _____ 10. salutation | j) related items that go one after the other |

The 3 Main Uses for Commas

Here are three of the main reasons for using a comma:

| | Use | Example |
|---|--|---|
| A | To provide information in a series | I drive a big, old, pink truck. |
| B | To join two complete thoughts (with a conjunction) | The sky is blue, but there is a mean cloud overhead. |
| C | To set off introductory or non-essential information | On my way to school, I bumped into my crazy cousin. |

Now let's look at each type in more detail.

The 3 Main Uses for Commas cont.

A. To separate items in a series

Use commas to separate a series of items that are the same part of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives).

- We had turkey, potatoes,* and peas for dinner.
- My friend jogs, swims, and rides his bike every day.
- We have to buy groceries, make dinner, and eat a meal.
- She loves her big, bulky, wool sweater.

Task 1

Write three sentences that use commas in a list. Use adjectives with the correct order in at least one of your sentences.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

*Note:

The comma before the final item (, and) in a series is called an Oxford comma, series comma, or serial comma.

Some style guides leave this comma out. Ask your teacher if he/she wants you to use a comma before *and* in a series.

Coordinate Adjectives

Be careful when using coordinate adjectives together. They need to be placed in a natural order: **opinion, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose.**

- They bought a **shiny, new, European** car.
(*opinion, opinion, origin*)
- Kelly has your **curly, red** hair.
(*opinion, color*)
- He owns two **ugly, leather** jackets.
(*opinion, material*)

Your sentence will sound funny to native English speakers if you don't use coordinate adjectives in the correct order before a noun. Try to remember this memory trick: **OSASCOMP.**

Non-Coordinate Adjectives

Some adjectives are non-coordinate adjectives. Non-coordinate adjectives need to be in a specific position to make sense. Do not use a comma between these types of adjectives.

- I have a **dark** green van.
The shade defines the color and must be directly in front of it. No comma is used.
- They have a cute **black** lab.
"Black lab" is short for "black labrador," which is a type of dog.

The 3 Main Uses for Commas cont.

B. To join two complete thoughts

In English, a complete thought is called an independent clause. You can combine independent clauses by using a comma and a coordinating conjunction (**for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**).

| Examples | | | |
|----------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| # | Independent Clauses | | Combined Sentence |
| 1 | The sky is blue. | There is a dark cloud overhead. | The sky is blue, but there is a dark cloud overhead. |
| 2 | I love red. | My front door is red. | I love red, so my front door is red. |
| 3 | We have a dog. | She thinks she's a cat. | We have a dog, but she thinks she's a cat. |
| 4 | It's a long drive. | The radio is broken. | It's a long drive, and the radio is broken. |
| 5 | I'm only 22. | I own a house. | I'm only 22, yet I own a house. |

Comma Splices

The comma and conjunction must go together. If you forget the conjunction, you create a comma splice.

- ✗ The sky is blue, there is a dark cloud overhead.
- ✓ The sky is blue, **but** there is a dark cloud overhead.

Memory Trick

The word **fanboys** can help you remember the coordinating conjunctions (**for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**).

Task 2

Are the following examples of comma splices? Write **Y** for yes or **N** for no.

- _____ 1. She's 44 years old, but she acts 22.
- _____ 2. We'll go out for dinner, we'll have sushi.
- _____ 3. I'm so thirsty so I need a glass of water.
- _____ 4. The market had red, green and yellow peppers.
- _____ 5. Before we go out, let's turn off the lights.
- _____ 6. We're buying a farm, we're moving to the country.

The 3 Main Uses for Commas cont.

C. To set off introductory and non-essential information

A comma is also used to set off introductory and non-essential clauses.

| Examples | | |
|----------|--|----------------|
| # | Sentence | Set-Off Clause |
| 1 | When you come to my house, bring a pillow.* | introductory |
| 2 | The house I grew up in, which is 100 years old, is on the lake.** | non-essential |
| 3 | After it rained, we had a picnic. | introductory |
| 4 | Next, add one cup of water. | introductory |
| 5 | By the time we get there, the kids will be asleep. | introductory |
| 6 | To keep the place tidy, we created a cleaning schedule. | introductory |
| 7 | Under the dining room table, you'll see the box of decorations. | introductory |
| 8 | My grandmother, who tells bad jokes at the table, loves that show. | non-essential |
| 9 | Ben Buckwold, the CEO of ESL Library, will be at the conference. | non-essential |

*Note:

INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES

Notice that the information before the comma is not a complete thought. It can't stand alone as a sentence.

**Note:

NON-ESSENTIAL CLAUSES

Notice that the information between the commas can be removed without affecting the understanding of the sentence.

- The house I grew up in is on the lake.

Grammar books call this non-essential information a "non-restrictive clause." These clauses often begin with a pronoun such as *who*, *which*, or *whose*.



The 3 Main Uses for Commas cont.

C. To set off introductory and non-essential information cont.

Exception #1

You do not use a comma if the independent clause (complete thought) comes first.

- ✗ We had a picnic, after it rained.
- ✓ We had a picnic after it rained.

Exception #2

If information is key to identifying which person or thing you are referring to, do not use commas.

- My grandmother who tells bad jokes at the table loves that show.

By removing the commas the writer is able to identify exactly which grandmother she is referring to. The writer may be specifying that she does not mean her other grandmother who is always polite at the table. Grammar books call this essential information a “restrictive clause.”

Task 3

Add any missing commas to the sentences below.

1. Beside the bed you'll see a suitcase.
2. To pass the time we played cards and board games.
3. His sister who is much older than we are took many naps.
4. We'll go to the beach if the sun comes out.
5. If you finish your work by 4:00 pm you can go home early.

The 3 Main Uses for Commas cont.

D. Review

Identify which purpose from pages 2–6 the commas are used for.
Write the letter (A, B, or C) on the line.

Purposes

- A. to separate items in a series
- B. to join two complete thoughts with a conjunction
- C. to set off information or non-essential information

- _____ 1. Don't forget to pick up your brother, phone your aunt, and buy your dad a birthday gift.
- _____ 2. The children were hungry, so they fell asleep on the couch.
- _____ 3. In the morning, empty the dishwasher.
- _____ 4. My sister, whose boyfriend is half her age, is getting married.
- _____ 5. After you do your homework, take out the trash.
- _____ 6. I want to call the doctor, but it's after hours now.
- _____ 7. The Smiths, who have been our neighbors for eight years, are moving.
- _____ 8. My math mark, which is higher than I expected, is not high enough for the program.
- _____ 9. My husband bought a beautiful, antique, leather sofa for our living room.
- _____ 10. First, stir the egg and the milk together.

Additional Uses for Commas

A comma is also used for a few other reasons:

| Reason | Examples |
|--|---|
| To separate information in dates, addresses, and large numbers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I live in Dallas, Texas. I was born on September 7, 1979. Over 100,000* people were affected. |
| To indicate a natural pause | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You live on the corner, right? (<i>tag question</i>) Call me back before next Wednesday, please. |
| To express contrast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We went swimming, not skating. Butter is required, never margarine. |
| To directly address someone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your response is too late, Lesley. Mindy, it was great to hear from you. Hi, friends! |
| To mark off a direct question | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> She said, "Do it yourself." After the game, Henri said, "I'm through with baseball." |
| To begin and close a letter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dear Elena,** Sincerely, Mom |

*Note:

Most style guides recommend commas after three digits, starting from the right (e.g., 2,500, 25,000, 250,000). It is acceptable to eliminate the comma in four-digit numbers (e.g., 1000 or 1,000).

**Note:

A colon may also be used after a salutation.

- Dear Elena:



Additional Uses for Commas cont.

Rule of Thumb

WHEN IN DOUBT, LEAVE IT OUT.

It's important to learn punctuation rules, but don't be surprised if you notice commas missing in print. Commas are slowly disappearing from informal writing. Many authors and journalists are using fewer commas too.

Task 4

Write five example sentences based on what you learned on page 8.
Present a variety of comma uses.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Common Comma Errors

English learners aren't the only ones who make errors with commas.

Native English writers make mistakes with commas too.

You have already learned about the *comma splice*.

Here are some other common errors to watch out for.

| # | Common Error | Examples (with correction) |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Using a comma before "that" | <p>✗ The letters on the table, that are ready to send, need stamps.</p> <p>✓ The letters on the table that are ready to send need stamps.</p> |
| 2 | Using a comma and conjunction before a dependent clause | <p>✗ Let's drop off the kids, before we go to the movies.</p> <p>✓ Let's drop off the kids before we go to the movies.</p> |
| 3 | Using a comma between a compound subject | <p>✗ Angelina, and Maria went shopping at the mall.</p> <p>✓ Angelina and Maria went shopping at the mall.</p> |
| 4 | Using a comma before identifying something or someone | <p>✗ I'm reading the book, <i>The Hunger Games</i> for school.</p> <p>✓ I'm reading the book <i>The Hunger Games</i> for school.</p> <p>✗ CEO, Ben Buckwold, will be at the conference.</p> <p>✓ CEO Ben Buckwold will be at the conference.*</p> |
| 5 | Using one comma instead of two for non-essential clauses | <p>✗ My grandparents, whose home is worth a million dollars won the lottery.</p> <p>✓ My grandparents, whose home is worth a million dollars, won the lottery.</p> |
| 6 | Using a comma between an adverb and an adjective | <p>✗ We received a really, large bill today.</p> <p>✓ We received a really large bill today.</p> |

*Note:

The person's name is essential information here.
The sentence would not make sense without the name.



Common Comma Errors cont.

Task 5

Circle the error(s) in each sentence below and make the necessary corrections.

1. Don't eat a big snack, before we go out to dinner.

2. The cookies, that are starting to burn, need to come out of the oven.

3. President, Barack Obama, is from Hawaii.

4. Your half cousin, whose first car was a Jaguar just bought a yacht.

5. Juan, and Tomoko went out for lunch.

6. We pick strawberries, whenever my aunt visits.

7. Our friends have some adorable, Siamese, kittens.

8. I bought a very, big, watermelon.

9. Approximately 3,0000 shipments went missing.

10. The day is young, there is still lots to do.

Editing Challenge

COMMON COMMA ERRORS

Write eight sentences containing common comma errors.
 Challenge a partner to spot and correct the errors.
 Include some tricky ones.

| # | Incorrect | Correct |
|---|-----------|---------|
| 1 | | |
| 2 | | |
| 3 | | |
| 4 | | |
| 5 | | |
| 6 | | |
| 7 | | |
| 8 | | |

Comprehension Check-In

Work with a partner and answer the following questions based on the lesson so far.

1. What are the three main uses of a comma?
2. Which pronouns are often used in non-restrictive clauses?
3. Why should you put a comma after "First" in a set of instructions?
4. Where does the comma(s) belong in this number? 245000000
5. Which part of speech is used with a comma to join two independent clauses? Give some examples of this part of speech.
6. What type of punctuation goes after a salutation?

A Checklist

CHECKING YOUR COMMA USE

- ☐ Look at all of the commas in your writing. Are they necessary?
- ☐ Look at the numbers in your writing. Do they require commas?
- ☐ Review the introductory phrases in your writing.
Do commas appear after them?
- ☐ Did you remove any unnecessary commas?
(Check for restrictive clauses and non-coordinate adjectives.)

Writing Challenge

25 COMMAS

In your notebook, write a fictional story using as many commas as you can. Try to include at least 25 commas. Make sure to use a good balance of commas, including commas that appear in a series, commas that require a conjunction to join two complete thoughts, and commas that set off introductory or non-essential information.

Have a partner check your comma use.
How many commas did you use? Did you use them all correctly?