

# Commas

When readers see a comma, they get a signal like “These two parts of the sentence are being separated for a reason.” Because commas often go in pairs, readers will look ahead to see if another one appears and what sentence part is being marked. Your readers can be confused if you use commas where they should not be used or if you leave them out where they are needed. If you can’t figure out from the guidelines in this section whether or not you need commas, follow this general guideline: **“When in doubt, leave them out.”** An excessive use of commas can be more distracting to a reader than some missing ones.

## Two checklists: when to use commas and when not to use commas

The two checklists provide general rules of thumb. Details and examples of each rule follow.

### Commas: Yes

1. Between two complete clauses separated by a coordinating conjunction: *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, *for*, or *yet*. The comma comes before the coordinating conjunction
  - ❖ **He frowned, but she laughed**
2. After a phrase or dependent clause occurring before the subject and the independent clause
  - ❖ **After the noisy party, the neighbors complained.**
3. Around parenthetical or nonrestrictive information inserted in a sentence
  - ❖ **My father, a computer programmer, works late at night.**
4. Between three or more items in a series
  - ❖ **He ordered eggs, bacon, and potatoes.**
5. Between adjectives not describing size, shape, age, color, nationality, religion, or material
  - ❖ **We ate a delicious, well-prepared, and inexpensive meal.**
6. Between an introductory verb and a quotation
  - ❖ **She said, “We have not a moment to lose.”**
7. Use commas with dates, addresses, and titles.
  - ❖ **On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed.**
  - ❖ **Please address the letter to Los Medanos College, 2700 East Leland Road, Pittsburg, California 94565**
  - ❖ **Trevor Williams, D.D.S., owns the new office building.**

### Commas: No

1. Not between subject and verb
  - ❖ **The gorilla sitting in the corner of the cage thumped his chest.**
2. Not before part of a compound structure that is not an independent clause
  - ❖ **She cried and called her mother.**
3. Not between two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction (use a period and a capital letter or a semicolon instead).
4. Not before a clause beginning with *that*
  - ❖ **They warned us that the meeting would be difficult.**
5. Not around essential restrictive information
  - ❖ **The player who scored the goal became a hero.**
6. Not after *such as*
  - ❖ **Popular fast-food items, such as hamburgers and hot dogs, tend to be high cholesterol.**
7. Not between adjectives giving information about size, shape, age, color, nationality, religion, or material
  - ❖ **They bought a big old green mirror**

## Commas for Coordination and Subordination

- 1) Enzo enjoys most kinds of music, but heavy metal gives him a headache.
- 2) Although the weather bureau had predicted rain, the day turned out bright and sunny.
- 3) The day turned out bright and sunny although the weather bureau had predicted rain.

- In sentence (1), a comma precedes the coordinating conjunction *but*, which joins together two independent ideas.
- In sentence (2), a comma follows the dependent idea because it precedes the independent idea.
- Sentence (3) does not require a comma because the independent idea precedes the subordinate one.

Use a comma before coordinating conjunctions—*and, but, for, nor, or, so, or yet*—that join two independent ideas.

Use a comma after a dependent idea only when the dependent idea precedes the independent one; do not use a comma if the dependent idea follows the independent one.

**Practice:** Punctuate correctly. Not every sentence requires additional punctuation.

*Example:* Because scrapped cars create millions of tons of waste recycling auto parts has become an important issue.

1. Today new cars are made from many old parts and manufacturers are trying to increase the use of recycled materials from old cars.
2. Scrapped cars can be easily recycled because they mostly consist of metals.
3. After these cars are crushed magnets draw the metals out of them.
4. However, the big problem in recycling cars is the plastic they contain.
5. Although plastic can also be recycled the average car contains about twenty different kinds of plastic.

6. Separating the different types of plastic takes much time but companies are developing ways to speed up the process.
7. Still, new cars need to be made differently before recycling can truly succeed.
8. Their parts should detach easily and they should be made of plastics and metals that can be separated from each other.
9. As we develop more markets for the recycled auto parts new cars may soon be 90 percent recycled and recyclable.
10. Our environment will benefit and brand-new cars will really be more than fifty years old!

## Commas to Set Off Appositives

(1) The Rialto, a new theater, is on Tenth Street.

- *A new theater describes the Rialto.*

(2) An elderly man, my grandfather walks a mile every day.

- What group of words describes *my grandfather*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(3) They bought a new painting, a rather beautiful landscape.

- What group of words describes *a new painting*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- *A new theater, an elderly man, and a rather beautiful landscape* are called *appositives*.

An *appositive* is usually a group of words that describes a noun or pronoun. It can occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.

Commas usually set off an appositive.

**Practice:** Circle the appositive, and punctuate correctly.

1. That door the one with the *X* on it leads backstage.
2. A short man he decided not to pick a fight with the basketball player.
3. Rudolph Pinderkist a noted expert on penguins will lecture tonight.
4. Hassim my friend from Morocco will be staying with me this week.
5. She expects to go to Midvale Technical College a fine institution.
6. We borrowed Joe's truck a lumbering monster to move my furniture.
7. Pickles my favorite food make my mouth pucker.
8. George Eliot a nineteenth-century novelist was a woman.
9. A very close race the election for mayor wasn't decided until 2 a.m.
10. Dr. Simpson a specialist in ethnic music always travels with a tape recorder.

## Commas After Introductory Phrases

By the end of the season, our local basketball team will have won thirty games straight.

- *By the end of the season* introduces the sentences.

## **Practice:**

Punctuate these sentences correctly. One sentence is already punctuated correctly.

1. By the end of January I'll be in Atlanta.
2. During the rainstorm we huddled in a doorway.
3. Every Saturday at 9 p.m. she carries her telescope to the roof.
4. After their last trip Fred and Nita decided on separate vacations.
5. This wall must be completely plastered by Friday.
6. By the light of the moon we could make out a dim figure.
7. During the coffee break George reviewed his psychology homework.
8. At the height of the season Joanne hurt her shoulder and could not pitch any longer.
9. In the deep end of the pool he found three silver dollars.
10. In almost no time they had changed the tire.

## **Using Commas with Dates, Addresses, and Titles**

- 1) On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.
- 2) Please send the package to Greg Tarvin at 708 Spring Street, Washington, Illinois 61571.
- 3) Sandra Barnes, M.D., performed the surgery.

**Practice:** Punctuate Correctly.

1. By January 1 2001 we might know the results from Florida.
2. Please deliver this note to Greg Haskell at 415 Hampstead Way Albany Illinois 99911.
3. Arthur Bend M.D. was found guilty of fraud.

## Review

Proofread the following essay for comma errors—either missing commas or commas used incorrectly. Correct any errors right on the page.

### Sitting Bull

(1) Sitting Bull the great Sioux chief was born about 1830. (2) From the stories of the tribal elders he learned that a Sioux must be brave strong generous and wise. (3) He also learned that a Sioux had to earn his adult name.

(4) When he was fourteen he earned the name Sitting Bull. (5) Armed with only a coup stick, a long wooden pole, he rode into battle against the Crow tribes. (6) He was the first Sioux to touch a Crow with his coup stick. (7) This act was considered as brave as killing an enemy. (8) After that battle, his father gave him his adult name a bow arrow a spear and other weapons.

(9) When he was thirty-five years old Sitting Bull became the chief of the Hunkpapa Sioux. (10) He led, his people, across the Great Plains. (11) He saw greedy men taking away native lands ruining native holy places and destroying the buffalo.

(12) The destruction of the buffalo was disastrous for the Sioux. (13) The Sioux used every part of the buffalo the “giver of life.” (14) They made leather clothes from the hide they ate the meat and they used the tendons for bowstrings. (15) In fact they even used buffalo droppings for fuel. (16) Without the buffalo the Sioux could barely survive. (17) They had to fight to protect their land and their “giver of life.”