

Writing Module

Commas

A **comma** is a valuable punctuation device.

Rule 1: Use commas to separate independent clauses.

Rule 2: Use commas after introductory elements that come before the main clause.

A **comma** is a valuable punctuation device. It separates structural elements into manageable segments and gives clarity to the meaning of a sentence.

There are rules about comma use in writing, and the misuse of commas is a common error. This module will address some of the most common rules.

Rules for Comma Usage

Rule 1: Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of the following seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet*.

The instructor explained the assignment, yet the student still didn't seem to understand what to do.

Yesterday was Carol's doctoral defense, so we took her out to lunch to celebrate.

Rule 2: Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause. Common starter words for introductory clauses include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, and while*.

While I was reading, the dog scratched on the back door to be let in the house.

When the rain stops falling, we will go for a walk.

Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include *yes, however, and well*.

However, you may find the process does not work.

Well, he meant to model good behavior.

Rule 3: Use commas to set off non-essential elements in the sentence.

Essential element or not?

- Does the sentence make sense without it?
- Does it interrupt the flow of the sentence?
- Does the sentence still make sense if you move it to another spot?

Rule 4: Use commas to separate three or more elements.

Rule 5: Use commas to separate coordinate adjectives.

Rule 3: Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are **not** essential to the meaning of the sentence.

That report, which is available only in an electronic form, is due on Friday to the chief operating officer.

How do you know if a word, phrase, or clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence? If you answer “yes” to one or more of the following questions, then the element is **not** essential and should be set off with commas:

- Does the sentence still make sense if you leave out the element?
- Does the element interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- Does the sentence still make sense if you move the element to a different position in the sentence?

For example if you leave out the element in the previous example, it would read:

That report is due on Friday to the chief operating officer.

The sentence still makes sense and is a complete sentence, so the first question would be answered with a “yes.” The element is not essential and should be off set with commas.

Rule 4: Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

The new owner promised to eliminate overtime, provide better food in the cafeteria, and improve working conditions.

Rule 5: Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives with equal status in describing the noun.

Coordinate adjectives or not?

- Can you reverse the order?
- Can you use *and* between them?

If you answer “yes” to either of the following questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma:

- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with *and* between them?

He was a difficult, stubborn child.

Are the adjectives *difficult* and *stubborn* coordinate or non-coordinate? If you reverse the order of the adjectives, you get:

He was a stubborn, difficult child.

The sentence still makes sense if you add *and* between the adjectives:

He was a stubborn and difficult child.

The adjectives in the examples are coordinate, and a comma should be used to separate them.

Let’s examine another example:

She often wore a gray wool suit.

Are *gray* and *wool* coordinate adjectives? If you reverse the order, does the sentence make sense?

She often wore a wool gray suit.

Possibly. Let’s ask the other determining question to make sure. If you add *and* between *wool* and *gray*, does the sentence make sense?

She often wore a wool and gray suit.

This does not make sense, so these adjectives are non-coordinate. A comma should **not** be used to separate them.

This concludes the major rules about the use of commas. However, it is more common to use commas incorrectly. This can break a sentence into illogical segments or confuse the reader with unnecessary pauses.

Rules to Avoid Comma Abuse

Rule 6: Don't use a comma to separate a subject from its verb.

Rule 6: Don't use a comma to separate the subject from the verb in a sentence.

Incorrect: The most important characteristic of a leader, is good communication skills.

The comma should **not** be used in this sentence.

Rule 7: Don't use a comma between two verbs.

Rule 7: Don't put a comma between two verbs or verb phrases.

Incorrect: Joe turned on the lawn mower, and ran into the bush.

The comma should **not** be used in this sentence.

Rule 8: Don't use a comma between two nouns in a subject.

Rule 8: Don't put a comma between two nouns or noun phrases in a compound subject.

Incorrect: Dave from accounting, and Eric from marketing play softball together.

The comma should **not** be used in this sentence.

Rule 9: Don't use a comma between the main clause and the dependent clause that follows it.

Rule 9: Don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent clause follows it.

Incorrect: Dave was late for the meeting, because the printer was jammed.

The comma should **not** be used in this sentence.

Correct comma usage is a key component in the clarity of your writing. You have seen when commas should be used and when they should not to be used. If you follow the basic rules provided when writing and proofreading your papers, you should have no problem with commas.

Return to the Graduate Success Prep Program available through the myFranklin Web site and do the exercises for this module.