

Common Uses for the Comma

Here are the main ways to use the comma in the average sentence.

1. Use a comma to separate three or more items in a series.

T _____ xxxx, yyyy, and zzzzz.

The results of the election came in late from Utah, Colorado, and California.
Trains, buses, and planes are just a few of the main modes of transportation.

2. Use a comma after the first part of a two-part sentence (compound sentence).

T _____, and the _____.

subject verb c.t. subject verb c.t.

The race began on time, and all the fans cheered wildly.

s. v. c.t. , conj. s. v. c.t.

3. Use a comma after a brief introductory phrase which begins a sentence.

In the first place,....	On the other hand,....	As a result,....
Secondly,....	In spite of this,....	Nevertheless,....
Finally,....	Consequently,....	In 1991,....

Almost no one attended the meeting. In spite of this, the media reported it extensively.

Everyone contributed to the food drive. As a result, it was a great success.

4. If you begin a sentence with a When...., If...., Since...., Although...., or Unless.... clause, use a comma at the end of that part of the sentence.

When it began to rain, we had to cancel our baseball game.

If we raise enough money at our car wash, we can go on a trip to Europe.

Since I had perfect attendance, my professor said I did not have to take his final.

Although everyone enjoyed the play, the cast members were exhausted at the end.

Unless our team wins its next game, we won't be in the play-offs.

5. Use a comma in front of a short not phrase which contradicts what has gone before.

Joe ordered a red car with black trim, not a black car with red trim.

A Complete Compendium for Creating Correct Commas

Here is a concise collection of the main times to use a comma correctly within a sentence. Use commas only when and where a specific rule REQUIRES them to be used. In all other cases, it would be better to omit the comma. As the old saying goes, “When in doubt, leave it out!”

I. Common uses of the comma in general

A. To separate the date from the year:

Many couples chose to be married on July 7, 2007.

B. To separate the year from the rest of the sentence:

July 7, 2007, was a day that many people considered very lucky.

C. To separate a city’s name from a state’s name:

Many people live in the huge metropolis of Chicago, Illinois.

D. Put a comma behind the state’s name if that name occurs after a city’s name and is followed by other words before the period:

The huge city of Chicago, Illinois, is home to millions of people.

Note: This rule applies only if both the city’s name and the state’s name are in the sentence together. If the state’s name is alone anywhere in the sentence, then do not use a comma after it.

The state of Illinois is a major source of America’s grain supply.

E. If the very first word in a sentence is *Yes* or *No*, then follow that word with a comma.

Yes, our modern world certainly does have a lot of serious problems facing it today.

II. Using Commas within Sentences

A. When NOT to use a comma within a sentence:

Do not use a comma in a sentence just because you want to “pause” at that point.

Wrong: The first thing John did when he came home, was to check his e-mail.

Correct: The first thing John did when he came home was to check his e-mail. (No commas or pausing needed anywhere!)

Remember: Every correctly used comma = a pause

but

Not every pause = a correctly used comma!

In other words, if a specific rule requires the use of a comma somewhere within a sentence, then the comma is correct and, yes, a pause should be expressed when you come to that comma.

However, just because you get a “feeling” that you ought to pause somewhere within a sentence, that feeling alone does not authorize the placement of a comma at that point in the sentence. You need the permission of a specific rule which calls for the use of a comma at that point.

In other words, **FIRST** you need a correctly placed comma; **THEN** you can pause when you read it. You cannot pause first and then, because of that pause, think that a comma goes there.

B. Do not use a comma between the subject and the verb of a sentence:

Wrong: Mary, drove all the way home to Los Angeles from her college in Pennsylvania.

Correct: Mary drove all the way home to Los Angeles from her college in Pennsylvania.

C. Do not use a comma in front of every *and* in the sentence:

Wrong: Roger, and his friends played pool, and listened to heavy metal songs all night at a local bar.

Correct: Roger and his friends played pool and listened to heavy-metal songs all night at a local bar.

Wrong: Our family went camping at Yellowstone last year, and had a great time.

Correct: Our family went camping at Yellowstone last year and had a great time.

III. Use a comma after a brief introductory word or phrase that begins a sentence:

In the first place,....	As a result,....	On the other hand,....	By the same token,....
Secondly,....	Consequently,....	However,...	Without a doubt,....
Thirdly,....	Therefore,....	In 2004,....	Naturally,....
Lastly,.....	In spite of this,....	At first,....	In general,....
Finally,....	On the one hand,....	Of course,....	

All the students had planned carefully for the fund-raising car wash.
As a result, the event went very well and made a lot of money.

IV. Use a comma at the end of a dependent clause that begins a sentence: A dependent clause will often begin with the words:

When..., Since..., Although..., Until..., If..., Unless..., or After...,

When Julie saw the huge limousine pull up in front of her house, she could not believe her eyes.

Since John was going to New York on business, he decided to take a tour of the United Nations building.

If everyone lit just one little candle, what a bright world this would be!

Note: The introductory phrase could also begin with an *....ing* verb phrase.

Wishing that he were anywhere else other than sitting in a dentist's chair, Keith closed his eyes and imagined that he was on a beautiful beach in Hawaii.

V. Use a comma in front of a short *not* phrase which contradicts something that has gone before it.

I ordered a red car with black trim, not a black car with red trim.

Note: If the word *and* is used in front of *not*, then no comma is needed.

I ordered a red car with black trim and not a black car with red trim.

VI. Use a comma in front of and behind a phrase which “re-names” or re-identifies something else right before it in the sentence.

Terry Bradshaw, one of the greatest football players of all time, is now working as a sportscaster.

My seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Stratton, is someone whom I shall always remember.

VII. Use a comma in front of and behind a group of words which interrupts or breaks the normal forward movement of the sentence. This interrupting phrase could be anywhere within the sentence: near the beginning, in the middle, or at the end.

The conquering of Mr. Everest, a feat which staggers the imagination, is something that only a handful of brave people have even dared to try.

The Biblical film *Ben-Hur*, which won a record of eleven Academy awards, is easily one of the most spectacular films ever made.

The Andersons were disgusted with their old refrigerator, which always seemed to break down just when they needed it the most.

Note: These interrupting phrases might also be placed inside parentheses. If they are, then commas are not needed.

The pyramids of Egypt (the only remaining wonder of the ancient world) are located near the city of Giza.

Note: Sometimes the interrupter might be just a single word or phrase, like *however* or *as a result*.

We learned that the general store was very far from our camp. We all decided immediately, as a result, to drive to it rather than to walk.

VIII. Use commas around the name of a person when the use of that name interrupts the forward flow of the sentence.

Do you realize, Edith, that you have not had a day off from work in three weeks?

Your contribution to the world of science, Dr. Bradley, is almost impossible to overemphasize.

IX. Use a comma between two equal adjectives side by side (without *and*) which are both describing one noun which follows directly behind them:

The tall, dignified man in the picture turned out to be Abraham Lincoln.

Note: If the word *and* is used between the two adjectives, then no comma is needed.

The famous American author Mark Twain eventually became a sad and cynical person.

X. Use a comma after a mild interjection at the very beginning of a sentence:

An interjection is a word or a sound which expresses a sudden emotion or feeling. Common interjections are *gee*, *gosh*, *oh*, *aw*, *wow*, *yea*, *shucks*, and *yeah*. They are not used very often in formal, academic writing but are common in creative narratives involving direct dialogue.

I'll always remember the lake in front of the house where I grew up. Gosh, it was so beautiful when it reflected the gorgeous sunsets!

XI. Use a comma in the middle of a sentence which contains a “the more..., the more...,” or “the more....., the less...” construction.

It seems like the more money I try to save each month, the more bills I have!

The less time one wastes, the more time one will have to enjoy life.

XII. Use a comma to separate three or more items in a series.

The series could occur anywhere in the sentence — beginning, middle, or end.

A comma should follow each item in the series:

The votes came in quickly from Utah, Idaho, and California.

John, Frank, Susan, and Julie were the only people who attended the meeting.

The series could also be short phrases.

We searched everywhere for Ted's lost keys — in the drawers, under the couch, by the fireplace, and even near the pool.