



## COMMA RULES

To comma or not to comma?

These rules have been put together for formal or academic contexts (even though the examples are kept simple for a better understanding). Therefore, you might encounter exceptions to these rules. A general awareness of the existence of variations in relation to different contexts or audiences is very important. The use of commas is often also a matter of personal taste in combination with essential rules.

### Independent (Main) clauses

- ✓ When two independent clauses are joined by the FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* – comma at the end of the first clause  
(Tom may forget to call, or he may forget to stop by.)
- ✗ Do not use a comma if there is no full clause (subject + verb) after the conjunction.  
(They left on Monday and came back on Tuesday.)
- But sometimes a comma in this situation is necessary to avoid confusion.  
(I saw that she was busy and prepared to leave. vs. I saw that she was busy, and prepared to leave.)
- ✗ Do not use a comma between independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction. Use a semicolon instead.  
(The bell rang; she sprinted for the door.)

### Dependent Clause

- ✓ When starting a sentence with a dependent clause, use a comma after it.  
(If you are not sure about this, let me know.)
- ✗ A comma is usually unnecessary when the sentence starts with an independent clause followed by a dependent clause.  
(Let me know if you are not sure about this.)

### Introductory Elements

- ✓ An introductory adverbial clause  
(When Jace starts working again, he will be happy.)
- ✗ Do not use a comma when adverbial clause follows the independent clause  
(Jace will be happy when he starts working again.)
  
- ✓ A long prepositional phrase or a series of prepositional phrases  
(For the rest of the summer, they enjoyed the warm weather.)
- ✗ Unless clarity or pacing demands one, there is no comma after one short introductory prepositional phrase.  
(In the summer they parted.)
- The use or non-use of the comma in short prepositional phrases is an example for personal taste.



- ✓ A non-finite clause (infinitive, gerund, or participial)  
(To receive help, you must ask for it.)  
(By applying early, you can expect a fast response.)  
(Overwhelmed with work, she made coffee.)
- ✗ Do not use a comma when infinitives or gerunds are used as the subject of a sentence.  
(To receive help was her goal.)  
(Applying early seemed like a good idea.)
- ✓ An adverb or phrase applying to the whole following statement, not just the verb  
(Interestingly, he also wrote a long apology letter.)  
Those constructions are called sentence adverb or sentence modifier.

## Introductory Words

- ✓ Use a comma after certain words that introduce a sentence, such as *however, on the other hand, furthermore, therefore, thereafter, consequently, next, finally, in conclusion, for example, ultimately, etc.*
- ✓ Yes or No at the beginning of a sentence  
(*Yes/ No*, the lecture begins at noon.)

## Items in a Series

- ✓ Use commas to separate words, phrases, or clauses in a series of three or more  
(Words: They considered *paprika, tomatoes, or cucumber* for their salad.)  
(Phrases: They walked *through the park, down the street, and into the French bistro* around the corner.)  
(Clauses: *The education system soared, general interests grew, and overall knowledge increased.*)
- Some writers omit the comma before the final *and* or *or* in a series. With it, however, clarity is established.
- ✗ Do not use a comma with only two items.
- ✗ Do not use a comma if you repeat *and* or *or* between each item.
- ✗ Do not use a comma before the first item or after the last.

## Coordinate Adjectives

- ✓ In a series of two or more, use commas to separate adjectives of the same kind and importance (=coordinate adjectives)→ think of the commas as substitutes for *and*.  
(Heavy, expensive books are not necessarily good ones.)
- ✗ Do not use commas between modifiers that are not coordinate (=the commas that are not substituting for *and*).
  - ✗ If a modifier describes the following adjective(s) rather than the noun  
(a deep blue car)
  - ✗ If the adjective is considered part of the noun  
(a tall pine tree)
  - ✗ If the adjectives are of different kinds (for e.g. adjectives of physical state, adjectives of opinion, adjectives of material, etc.)

## Parenthetical Expressions

- ✓ These are words or word groups that interrupt the flow of thought in a sentence but are not necessary to the sentence. They can be removed from the sentence without changing its essential meaning. Set such expressions off with a pair of commas, which act almost like parentheses.



(She will be, *in my opinion*, voted best teacher.)

(He, *on the other hand*, is not exactly cooperative.)

(She is too shy, *to be frank* → my opinion on her vs. She is too shy to be frank → her nonexistent behavior)

- ✓ Other common parenthetical expressions:  
*in my opinion, on the other hand, as a matter of fact, to tell the truth, incidentally, in the first place, by the way, of course*
- ✓ Within a clause, words such as *however, moreover, therefore* and *nevertheless* (=conjunctive adverbs) are punctuated as parenthetical.  
(I like coffee, *however*, tea is my favorite beverage.)
- You may choose not to set off *perhaps, likewise, at least, indeed, therefore, thus* and certain similar expression in a sentence where you feel they do not interrupt your flow of thought or where you want to emphasize them.  
(Both possible: She was indeed a good swimmer. She was, indeed, a good swimmer.)

## Nonessential (Nonrestrictive) Clauses, Phrases, and Appositives

Nonessential clauses

- ✓ Put commas around clauses that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence (think of them as parenthetical expressions).  
(My brother's trophy, *which was displayed on the refrigerator for over a year*, was finally exchanged by my self-made statue.)  
Sentence without nonessential clause: My brother's trophy was finally exchanged by my self-made statue.  
→ Sentence without nonessential clause still contains all necessary information and can be understood without this additional clause. It does not omit necessary information but gives additional information.
- ✓ A *because*-clause giving information you merely consider incidental is nonessential.  
(The flag has thirteen stripes, *because* they represent the original thirteen states.)

Essential (restrictive) clauses

- ✗ Omit commas around clauses that are essential to the meaning of the sentence: clauses that answer "which one(s)?"  
(The trophy *which was displayed on the refrigerator for over a year* was finally exchanged by my self-made statue. (explains which trophy is meant))  
Without italicized part, the sentence could refer to any trophy. Therefore, this part restricts the meaning of the trophy.
- ✗ A *because*-clause containing your point of emphasis is essential.  
(The flag has thirteen stripes *because* they represent the original thirteen states.)

Nonessential - commas

Essential - no commas

Tip: To tell whether a clause is essential, try the *that*-test:

Adjective clauses beginning with *that* are always essential; also, if you can change *who* or *which* to *that* and it still sounds right, you have an essential clause.

*Essential*: It was painted by an aunt who [or *that*] had studied art in Paris.

*Nonessential*: It was painted by Aunt Leia, who [but not *that*] had studied art in Paris.

(In U.S. usage *that* is generally preferred over *which* to begin an essential clause.)

(The team *that* finishes last will be late for the next round.)

However, *which* can also be used for providing essential information.)



## Nonessential phrases

- Follow the principle for nonessential clauses
- ✓ Nonessential: (Tom, in his bright red suit, was really quite a sight.)
- ✗ Essential: (The boy in the bright red suit was really quite a sight.)

## Nonessential appositives

- ✓ Most appositives are nonessential, needing commas.  
(Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film on the golden 20s, *The Great Gatsby*, is a work of art.)
- ✗ However, some appositives give essential information, answering "which one?" and therefore take no commas.  
(Baz Luhrmann's film *The Great Gatsby* is a work of art.)

## Controlling your meaning

→ You control the meaning of your sentences when you use or omit commas, signaling nonessential or essential information.

## Absolute Phrases

(*The weather having turned chilly*, Lily grabbed her coat.)  
(*Mary, her confidence restored*, awaited the interview.)

## Names or other words used in direct address

(Tell us, *Marlene*, what solution you propose?)  
(*Mr. President*, may we quote you on that?)

## Sr. and Jr.

- ✓ If a person's name is followed by Sr. or Jr., a comma follows the last name, although this is no longer mandatory.  
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- ✓ However, if a comma does precede Sr. or Jr., another comma must follow the entire name when it appears midsentence.  
(James Rohan Sr. is here. Or: James Rohan, Sr., is here.)
- ✓ Similarly, use commas to enclose degrees or titles used with names.  
(James Rohan, M.D., is here.)

## Direct Quotations

- ✓ The comma and the quotation mark can be paired in several ways. There are differences between AE and BE.
- ✓ In Great Britain and many other parts of the world, punctuation is usually placed within quotation marks only if it is part of what is being quoted or referred to.
- ✓ In American English, the comma is commonly included inside a quotation mark.
- ✓ Generally, use a comma to set off a direct quotation (someone's exact words) from words that precede, follow, or interrupt it.  
(AE: "You may see the headmaster now," said the secretary.)  
(AE: "An apple a day," declares the proverb, "keeps the doctor away.")

## Such as, Especially, Particularly

- ✓ examples introduced by *such as*, *especially*, *particularly*  
(She excelled in many sports, *particularly* track.)
- ✗ Some *such as* phrases are essential, taking no commas.  
(Papers *such as* this one are thrown into the trash can.)



## Expressions of Contrast

- ✓ expressions of contrast  
(That's his problem, *not* yours.)

## Clarity

- ✓ wherever needed for clarity, to prevent misreading
- ✓ Omitting or misplacing needed commas can muddle or change the intended meaning.  
(Last month the Smiths took their third cruise to the Caribbean on the Atlantic Princess.  
[All three cruises were on that ship])  
(Last month the Smiths took their cruise to the Caribbean, on the Atlantic Princess. [Not all cruises were on that ship])

## Omitted Words

- ✓ in place of omitted or understood words  
(Some Norwegians wanted to base their national language on the speech of the capital city; others, on the speech of the rural countryside.)  
Sentence without omitted words:  
(Some Norwegians wanted to base their national language on the speech of the capital city; others wanted to base it on the speech of the rural countryside.)  
Generally, in very formal contexts you would choose to write a full sentence, instead of omitting words.

## Etc.

- ✓ A comma should precede the term *etc.* It is also recommended to use a comma after *etc.* when it is placed midsentence.  
(Phones, computers, iPads, etc., are not allowed here.)

## Tag Questions

- ✓ before a confirmatory (tag) question  
(The campus is safe after dark, *isn't*?)

## Letters, Emails

- ✓ in letters or emails
- ✓ after addressing a person in a position of respect  
(Dear [Name],)
- ✓ after the complementary close in all correspondence  
(Very truly yours,)

## Dates and Addresses

- ✓ In dates and addresses
- ✓ In a month-day-year date, place the year within commas, as if it were parenthetical. Do the same with the state or country in an address.  
(In Skokie, Illinois, on July 4, 2011, they were married.)
- ✗ Do not use a comma in a month-year or day-month-year date or between a state and a ZIP code  
(May 2021)  
(6 June 2021)  
(Phoenix, AZ 85032)



- differences in BE and AE:
- British English dates are usually written in the order day-month-year  
(the 15th of March, 2021.)  
(Monday, 15 March 2021)  
(Monday the 15th of March, 2021)
- American English dates are usually written in the order month-day-year  
(July 4, 2011)  
(Monday, March 15, 2021)

---

## Do Not Use a Comma

- ✗ To separate subject and verb or verb and completer  
(Many reference *books are* not online.)  
(Schools *provide* free *counseling*.)
- ✗ To join two independent clauses  
(A water main has burst\_\_the street is closed. (see below))
  - ✓ Join independent clauses with FANBOYS; *for, and nor, but, or, yet, so*  
(=coordinating conjunctions), or a semicolon.  
(A water main has burst, and the street is closed.)  
(A water main has burst; the street is closed.)
- ✗ If no comma is needed: Do not overload your sentences with commas. Use only those necessary for clarity, pace, or emphasis.

### Sources:

Ellsworth, Blanche and John A. Higgins. *English Simplified*. 13<sup>th</sup> ed. Pearson, 2012.  
<<https://englishlessonsbrighton.co.uk/how-to-write-dates-british-american-english/>> (letzter Zugriff 22.06.2021).

Dr. John Thomson (Institut für Anglistik Amerikanistik)

