

Commas: Rules and Tips

Commas are one of the most common and confusing punctuation marks out there. They can seem scary because they are used in such a wide variety of contexts, and many comma rules have exceptions or differ based on individual preference. This guide covers the basic comma rules and some common errors to avoid.

Let's eat, Timmy.
↳ Correct at the dinner table
Let's eat Timmy.
↳ Correct on a raft in the ocean

Lists

- Always use commas to separate items in a series of three or more:
 - I like acting, singing, and dancing.
- Sometimes use commas to separate adjectives in a list of two or more. This applies only if you can switch the order of the adjectives without changing the meaning:
 - It was a slimy, murky pond.
 - NO COMMA: It was a fun birthday party.

Dates

- Use a comma to separate the day from the year:
 - My license expires on March 17, 2024.
- Use a comma after days of the week:
 - My license expires on Sunday, March 17, 2024.
- Use a comma to continue the sentence after a date:
 - My license expires on Sunday, March 17, 2024, meaning I have lots of time.
- Do not use a comma with only the month and year:
 - My license expires in March 2024.

Addresses

- Use commas to separate elements in an address:
 - I addressed the letter to Neo Xiong, 2600 Oak Road, Saint Paul, MN 555106.

Sentence Structure

- Use a comma plus coordinating conjunction to separate independent clauses in a compound sentence:
 - I ate lunch, and I took a nap.
- Use a comma after an introductory phrase:
 - After grabbing his keys, he ran out the door.

Conversations

- Use a comma when addressing someone directly:
 - Leslie, I need you to work tomorrow.
- Do not use a comma when referring to someone in third person:
 - Leslie worked on Friday.
- Use a comma when responding to a question:
 - Yes, I will walk the dog.
- Use a comma with an action word to introduce a direct quotation:
 - My friend said, “I miss you.”
 - NO COMMA: My friend said she misses me.
- Use a comma to separate a tag question from the rest of the sentence:
 - You went to East High School, right?

Interrupters and Appositives

- Use commas around interrupters:
 - Alma, on the contrary, chose the smaller chair.
- Use commas around non-essential appositives:
 - The 46th president, Joe Biden, ate ice cream.
- Do not use commas around essential appositives:
 - Former president Harry Truman ate ice cream.

Adjective Clauses

- Adjective clauses starting with “which” will always need a comma:
 - The storm left a foot of snow, which made driving hazardous.
- Adjective clauses starting with “that” will never need a comma:
 - The snow left a foot of snow that made driving hazardous.
- Adjective clauses starting with “who” will sometimes have a comma. If they are non-essential, use commas. If they are essential, do not use commas.
 - NON-ESSENTIAL: Gymnasts, who frequently flip through the air, tend to be on the shorter side.
 - ESSENTIAL: Gymnasts on the taller side might have trouble flipping through the air.

Oxford Commas

An oxford comma is placed before the “and” in a list with three or more elements:

- The American flag is red, white, and blue.

This comes down to individual preference. Check with your instructor if you aren’t sure whether to include or omit the oxford comma. The most important thing is stay consistent throughout your writing!

COMMON ERRORS

Do not place a comma between a subject and verb:

- The iced coffee, is way too expensive.
- ✓ The iced coffee is way too expensive.

Do not place a comma before a coordinating conjunction if it is not between two independent clauses:

- I woke up, and showered.
- ✓ I woke up and showered.

Do not place a comma after an independent clause when it is followed by a dependent clause:

- She ate the cake, before I got home.
- ✓ She ate the cake before I got home.
- ✓ Before I got home, she ate the cake.