


5 Useful Rules for Commas


Learning these **five most useful rules for commas** will help you improve your academic writing. When you use commas effectively, your readers can understand your ideas without getting distracted.

1. **Intro. Commas: use after introductory &/or transitional words or phrases** (see box on reverse side)
 - a. **For example**, Brooks (2013) has stated that...
 - b. **In contrast**, Ericson (2002) argued that...
 - c. **During the mid-nineteenth century**, the population of Chicago grew rapidly.
 - d. **Based on direct observation**, our study concluded that...


2. **List Commas: use commas to separate three or more items in a list**
 - a. **Employers, scholars, and current students** will all find this software beneficial.
 - b. When we meet tomorrow, we could **go out for tacos, see a movie, or chill at the beach**.
 - c. Johnson et al. (2016) defined cognitive rules as learned relationships between **cues, actions, and outcomes**.

3. **Optional Commas: For longer sentences: use a comma between two independent clauses, joined with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) (No comma is needed for short sentences!)** (Independent clauses **can each stand alone** as a complete sentence.)
 - a. The field of psychology has made great strides, **but** little research has been conducted on positive psychology until the past decade.
 - b. I procrastinated on that assignment **and** regretted it.  **(Shorter sentence; no comma)**
 - c. Drug use disorders and mental illness are correlated, **so** they often co-occur together.

4. **Extra Info. Commas: use commas around (before & after) “interrupter” phrases that add extra info** (Make sure that **if you take out the interrupter, the sentence can still stand on its own.**)
 - a. Joan Miró, **a Spanish painter and sculptor**, joined the Surrealist group in 1924.
 - b. Articles on ethics, **for example**, should focus on the implications of the findings.
 - c. Portobello mushrooms, **which are actually just large crimini mushrooms**, are delicious.
 - d. In recent years, **however**, there has been increasing controversy surrounding that issue.


 These phrases don't always “interrupt” the middle of a sentence – sometimes they are at the beginning or the end of a sentence! (**See #1 above**)

- i. **However**, there has been increasing controversy surrounding the issue in recent years.
- ii. The FDA has not yet approved the treatment for that specific type of disease, **however**.

 Don't use commas if a reader would need the information to identify **which person/thing**.

- i. Students who study hard will do well in my class.
- ii. The movie (that) I saw last night was really good.

5. **Adjective Commas: use a comma between adjectives, but ONLY:**
 - 1) **If you could use “and” between them** and 2) **If you could switch the order of the adjectives**
 - a. You should ideally think it through in a very **deliberate, mechanical** manner.
 - b. Setting new treatment goals can have a **revitalizing, motivating, and empowering** effect on the relationship between the clinician and the patient.
 - c. La Colmena is a **delicious, authentic Mexican** restaurant.

 There is no comma between “authentic” and “Mexican” because you cannot use “and” there and cannot switch the order and say: “Mexican authentic restaurant.” The words “Mexican restaurant” act like one chunk (noun phrase).

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Practice: Add commas where needed (Answers at the bottom)

1. They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark so they decided to camp for the night.
2. As a result of Shin's (2012) findings other researchers have begun to view cognition differently.
3. There are however some arguably significant differences among the three coding methods
4. Women are the chief educators of the family yet women outnumber men in adult illiteracy.
5. Purchasing an expensive flashy red sports car won't solve all of your problems.
6. Distance counseling can take place on the phone through email or even on video chat.
7. Dr. Myerson a noted authority on autism has argued that science is getting closer to understanding the cause of the disorder.
8. Employees have greater opportunities for career growth at a fast-paced dynamic small company.
9. If approved the new drug could be used to treat depression for example.
10. Sleep diet and exercise have been called the three pillars of health.

The Five Rules

1. **Intro. Commas:** use after introductory and/or transitional words or phrases (see box below)
2. **List Commas:** use commas to separate three or more items in a list
3. **Optional Commas:** use a comma between two independent clauses, joined with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)
4. **Extra Info. Commas:** use commas before & after "interrupter" phrases that add extra info
5. **Adjective Commas:** use a comma between adjectives, but ONLY: 1) If you could use "and" between them and 2) If you could switch the order of the adjectives

Introductory/Transitional Phrases that are followed by commas

(#1 Intro. Commas)

Or, which can be used as "interrupter" phrases, surrounded by commas

(#4 Extra Info. Commas)

As a result,

Furthermore,

In fact,

On the contrary,

Consequently,

However,

In other words,

On the one hand,

Conversely,

Instead,

In particular,

On the other hand,

For example,

In the same way,

In spite of recent

Rather,

For instance,

In a similar way,

evidence,

Similarly,

Finally,

In addition,

Moreover,

Specifically,

First,

In contrast,

Nevertheless,

Therefore,

Answers to Practice Exercises

1. They couldn't make it to the summit and back before dark, so they decided to camp for the night.
2. As a result of Shin's (2012) findings, other researchers have begun to view cognition differently.
3. There are, however, some arguably significant differences among the three coding methods
4. Women are the chief educators of the family, yet women outnumber men in adult illiteracy.
5. Purchasing an expensive, flashy red sports car won't solve all of your problems.
6. Distance counseling can take place on the phone, through email, or even on video chat.
7. Dr. Myerson, a noted authority on autism, has argued that science is getting closer to understanding the cause of the disorder.
8. Employees have greater opportunities for career growth at a fast-paced, dynamic small company.
9. If approved, the new drug could be used to treat depression, for example.
10. Sleep, diet, and exercise have been called the three pillars of health.