

Comma Usage

Comma usage can be very confusing for some writers to grasp, especially when in the past, students have not been taught the reasoning behind the art. The comma has many uses, but most are in the interest of adding clarity to a sentence's meaning by adding emphasis, separating sections of content, and adding descriptive information to a main theme.

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses (complete sentences).

Coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*

- *Class was over, so the students went home.*

Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause, when at the beginning of a sentence or after a semi-colon.

Introductory words: *instead, therefore, finally, however, otherwise, finally, also*

- *Finally, she finished her essay.*

Introductory/transitional phrases: *as a result, of course, in addition, in other words, for example, on the other hand*

- *On the other hand, she still had other homework to complete.*

Use a comma between all items in a series.

- *Tomorrow, I will need my calculator, graph paper, and pencil.*

Use a comma between coordinate adjectives.

- *Sarah is a warm, gentle, affectionate mother.*

Use a comma to set off nonrestrictive elements (asides or additional information).

A nonrestrictive modifier describes a noun or pronoun whose meaning has already been clearly defined or limited. Because the modifier contains nonessential or parenthetical information, it is set off with commas.

If you remove the nonrestrictive element from a sentence, the meaning does not change dramatically.

- *The campers need sturdy shoes, which are expensive.*
- *I am going to a meeting with Julia, my older sister, to discuss our trip.*

Use commas to set off transitional expressions.

Transitional words and phrases are often used to show the logical transition between sentences or paragraphs.

Transitional words (conjunctive adverbs): *accordingly, also, anyway, instead, likewise, moreover, nevertheless, still, therefore*

Transitional phrases: *for example, of course, at the same time, in comparison, as a result*

When a transitional expression appears between independent clauses in a compound sentence, it is preceded by a semicolon and is usually followed by a comma.

- *Sam did not understand our language; moreover, he was unfamiliar with our customs.*

When a transitional expression appears at the beginning of a sentence or in the middle of an independent clause, it is usually set off with commas.

- *As a matter of fact, American football was established by fans who wanted to play a more organized game of rugby.*
- *Natural foods are not always salt free. Celery, for example, contains more sodium than most people would imagine.*

Use a comma to set off words and phrases according to conversation and to introduce or interpret quotes.

- *Forgive me, Angela, for forgetting your birthday.*
- *The instructor told the students, “Please come to class on time.”*
- *“Reading to children,” the author of the article writes, “is of greatest importance.”*

Use a comma to separate information.

Locations: *I was born in Mexico City, Mexico.*

Dates: *This year, Independence Day will be on Wednesday, July 4th.* (Note comma after “this year” (introductory phrase).

Titles: *Sarah Smith, Ph. D., will give a presentation today.*

References:

Hacker, D. (2011). *A writer’s reference* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s.

Developed by Lindsay K. Fryer, for Antioch University