

Putting Commas in Their Place

A summary of the most common uses of the comma

The COMMA (,) has more uses than any other punctuation mark, and for that reason alone it gets *misused* more than any other punctuation mark. It's a simple matter of the law of averages.

The basic function of the comma—and a function it shares to some extent with the SEMICOLON, the DASH, and the COLON—is to create pauses *within* the body of a sentence. These pauses serve one of two purposes: one, they promote clarity; two, they help control the rhythm of the sentence and the emphasis accorded to specific ideas or images.

Summarized in this section are the situations that generally require a comma decision. Before we get to these specific situations, though, here are some observations about comma use in general.

1. **Two-way street.** It is just as bad to insert commas where they don't belong as it is to omit them where they clearly *do* belong.

2. **Two for the road.** Commas that set off elements *within* the body of a sentence almost always come in pairs—one at the beginning of the element and the other at the end. You can frequently defend a decision to leave *both* commas out, but you can rarely defend a decision to use just one comma and leave the other out.

3. **Lean and mean.** The tighter your sentences, the less need for commas. So if you find yourself making an abundance of comma decisions in a single sentence, chances are the sentence is too convoluted. Simplify.

4. **Beyond the law.** If adhering to a comma “rule” could conceivably obscure the meaning of your sentence, ditch the rule.

ITEMS IN A SERIES: Group therapy

Guideline. Use a comma to separate items (words, PHRASES, and CLAUSES) that follow each other in a series but are not separated by a CONJUNCTION. Be consistent when it comes to punctuating the next-to-last item in the series. (See box, page 98.)

Last night's dinner menu consisted of goose liver, leg of lamb, and dessert. (Commas are needed because goose liver, leg of lamb, and dessert are items in a series.)

The noise occurs when we turn the machine on, when we turn it off, and when we move from one speed to the next. (Commas are needed because the three clauses in the sentence appear in a series.)

A closer look. This rule usually applies to a series of *three* items or more (most series consisting of two items are separated by a conjunction and therefore do not need a comma to keep them distinct). Its main purpose is to prevent the confusion that arises in the following sentences:

✓ Last night's dinner menu consisted of goose liver leg of lamb and dessert.

The noise occurs when we turn the machine on when we turn it off and when we move from one speed to the next.



The Comma Before the Final “and” in a Series

A look at the options

When it comes to inserting or omitting the comma that precedes the conjunction before the last item—the technical term is the serial comma—no fewer than three options are legitimately open to you. Here are the options, along with the pros and cons of each. You can decide for yourself which rule to adopt.

Option one: *Always* use it before the *and*, no matter how many items are in the series.

Option two: Insert it when you think it’s needed; leave it out when you don’t think it’s needed.

Option three: Omit it when there are only three items in the series, but insert it once the number of items reaches four or above. Exception: when omitting the comma might create ambiguity.

Choosing sides: The first is favored by many publishing houses and by the publishers of scholarly magazines. It’s the simplest to follow, and the principle I have used in this book. The second is widely used by newspapers and magazines, whose editors like this option because it saves space. The last of these three options is old-fashioned and isn’t followed much anymore.

Whichever option you choose, make sure that clarity doesn’t suffer. In other words, *always* insert a comma before the final conjunction if there is any chance that the meaning might be misunderstood because of the comma’s absence.

MODIFIERS IN A SERIES: Parallel tracks

Guideline. Use a comma to separate two or more ADJECTIVES that modify the same noun, but only when the adjectives represent qualities that are *parallel* to or *independent* of each other.

A closer look. To tell whether adjectives in a series are independent modifiers (and should be separated by commas), see what happens when you insert the word *and* between them. If the insertion produces gibberish, the adjectives need to act as a unit and should *not* be separated by a comma. If the phrase still makes sense with the *and*, use a comma.

The report offers a penetrating, accurate analysis of the frozen guacamole industry. (A comma is needed between penetrating and accurate because each adjective could act as an independent modifier. Test: . . . a penetrating and accurate analysis . . . makes sense.)

We held the tango contest in the large blue room next to the cafeteria. (No comma is needed between large and blue because the two modifiers work in tandem to identify the room. Test: . . . a large and blue room . . . doesn’t make sense.)

RESTRICTIVE AND NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES: Life support

Guideline. Base your decision to insert or omit commas before and after RELATIVE CLAUSES on the extent to which the clause limits the meaning of the word it refers back to. Omit commas when the clause is RESTRICTIVE—limits the meaning. Insert commas when the clause is

NONRESTRICTIVE—doesn't limit the meaning. (For more on restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, see page 162.)

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. (No commas are needed here because who live in glass houses is a restrictive clause. The sentence would not retain its intended meaning if the clause were left out.)

The people next door, who live in a glass house, have begun throwing stones. (Commas are needed here because who live in a glass house is nonrestrictive. It isn't necessary to identify who is meant by "the people next door.")

THE APPOSITIVE: Mirror image

Guideline. Use commas to set off any word or words that are **APPOSITIVE** to another word in the sentence.

A closer look. A word or group of words is in apposition to another word when it is, in effect, a mirror image of that word: when it is the same part of speech and relates to the rest of the sentence in the same way. The most common mistake people make with appositives is to use only one comma—rather than a set.

James Trout, *the noted fishing expert*, will [not James Trout, the noted fishing expert (no comma) will . . .] be the guest speaker at next week's clambake. (The phrase in italics is in apposition to the subject.)

Alligator wrestling, *a sport that originally developed in Florida*, has begun to lose some of its appeal, especially among the alligators. (The clause in italics is in apposition to the subject, alligator wrestling.)

An even closer look. Don't confuse a true appositive with a noun preceded by a **MODIFIER**.

Noted fishing expert James Trout will be the guest speaker at next week's clambake. (No comma is needed here because Noted fishing expert is a modifier, not an appositive.)

CLAUSES AND PHRASES THAT INTRODUCE A SENTENCE: Just for openers

Guideline. Use a comma to separate lengthy introductory phrases or dependent clauses from the main body of the sentence. Make an exception for phrases that are short and refer to time and place.

As you requested, I am sending along an autographed photograph of the emperor. (A comma follows requested because as you requested is an introductory clause that precedes the main body of the sentence.)

Despite the fact that snow is predicted for Friday, we have no plans to cancel the tango contest. (Despite the fact that snow is predicted for Friday is followed by a comma because it is an introductory clause preceding the main body of a sentence.)

Having discounted every other possibility, we are now convinced that Dimitri is somewhere in Bratislava. (Having discounted every other possibility is followed by a comma because it is a lengthy introductory phrase that precedes the main body of the sentence.)

But:

Last December we wrote to tell you about a new line of guacamole-flavored ice creams we have just developed. (No comma is needed here because the phrase Last December is short and refers to place.)

But:

In 1986, our company had only three employee hot tubs. (The presence of a comma [an option] creates a stronger pause and draws more attention to the year.)

INTERRUPTORS: Changing direction

Guideline. Use a comma to set off short words and phrases that interrupt the flow of the sentence, especially when they contradict, qualify, or amend what has come before.

We would love to take part in your tango contest. We have just learned, *however*, that we are ineligible to participate. (Commas are needed because *however* interrupts the flow of the sentence.)

The new plot, *in contrast to the plot we developed last year*, has no loopholes. (Commas are needed here because the phrase *in contrast to the plot we developed last year* interrupts the flow of the sentence.)

A closer look. If you want to deemphasize the pauses that would normally occur as the result of a phrase that interrupts the flow, you can omit the commas.

We would love to take part in your tango contest. We were planning in fact to hold a contest of our own. (Omitting the commas before and after *in fact* makes the sentence flow more smoothly and quickly but takes the emphasis away from *in fact*.)

COMMAS IN A COMPOUND SENTENCE: Balancing act

Guideline. Use a comma between INDEPENDENT CLAUSES separated by a CONJUNCTION (*and, or, for, but, etc.*) in a COMPOUND SENTENCE. Use your judgment when the clauses are short or the SUBJECT is the same for both clauses.

Our group has spent the past sixteen months studying the effect that lunar tides have on productivity, and our manager will be delivering her report next Friday. (A comma separates the two clauses because each clause represents an independent thought.)

I hate the idea, and Dimitri feels the same way. (A comma separates the two clauses because each clause represents an independent thought.)

A closer look. If the two independent clauses in a compound sentence are short and, in particular, if the subject is the same in both, the comma becomes less critical. In general, though, it's a good idea to follow the rule no matter what. This will *prevent* you from writing sentences that read as follows:

I hate the idea and Dimitri feels the same way.

I intend to eliminate the problem and Brutus has promised to help.

CLAUSES AND PHRASES IN CONTRAST: Accentuating the negative

Guideline. Use a comma to give more emphasis to a CLAUSE or PHRASE that contradicts or draws a contrast to an earlier idea.

We introduced the new guacamole-flavored ice cream because we believed in it, *not because we simply wanted to add another flavor to our line.* (Note: If you wanted to give even more emphasis to the clause in italics, you could have used a dash. See page 111.)

COMMAS BEFORE DIRECT QUOTES: Worth quoting

Guideline. Use a comma to separate a direct quote from the word that precedes the quotation.

Immediately after Brutus spoke at the meeting last night, Cinna stood up and said, "I don't know about you, but I'm out of here." (A comma is needed to separate the quoted statement from the rest of the sentence.)

A closer look. This rule does not apply to indirect quotes. (For more on direct and indirect quotes, see *Quotation Marks*, page 115.)

Immediately after Brutus spoke at the meeting last night, Cinna stood up and said that he was leaving. (No comma is needed here because there is no direct quote.)

DIRECT ADDRESS: Personal touch

Guideline. Use a comma to set off the name of anyone you are addressing directly in your writing.

Let me close this letter, Dimitri, by telling you how pleased we all are with the work you are doing in Bratislava. (Commas are needed to set off *Dimitri*, who is being directly addressed.)



The Comma's Other Uses at a Glance

<u>Situation</u>	<u>Example</u>
Salutation in a friendly letter	Dear Dimitri,
Day from the year	We founded this company on December 14, 1982.
City from a state	Our Midwest headquarters is in Milwaukee, WI.
To separate comparative statements	The more we try to help them, the more they resist.
In place of omitted words	We've called, no answer.
People's names, when reversed	Lincoln, Abraham John, Elton
Numbers in groups of three	Last year's sales totaled more than \$2,000,000.
After <i>etc.</i> in the middle of a sentence	We have checked the figures from all the cities, including Chicago, Milwaukee, Atlanta, etc., and we still have been unable to find the problem.

Question Mark

Questionable uses

There are two situations relating to question marks that sometimes create confusion. Here is a look at each.

THE POLITE REQUEST: Asking or telling

Guideline. Sentences that pose a question in the form of a polite request do not necessarily have to end with a question mark. The test is whether the statement demands an answer.

Would you be kind enough to respond to this invitation as soon as possible. (The question mark is omitted because no answer is required. No one is likely to say, "I will not be kind enough to respond to that invitation.")

INDIRECT QUESTIONS: Telling statements

Guideline. Indirect questions (questions embedded in a straight statement) do not generally end with a question mark.

Dimitri keeps asking us when he can come home from Bratislava. (A question mark isn't needed here because the sentence is a statement, not a true question.)

But:

What Dimitri wants to know is, when can he come home from Bratislava? (The question mark is needed because the last element in the sentence is phrased as a question.)

The Colon*Looking ahead*

Used properly, the colon lets you do something no other punctuation mark enables you to do as well: produce a pause that alerts the reader to what is about to follow. (The dash can serve this function as well, but the dash does other things, too. It's not as specialized.)

THE COLON BEFORE A LIST: By the numbers

Guideline. Use a colon to create a strong pause between a list of items and the word that introduces the list.

The order we placed last week included the following items: pencils, pads, paper clips, and a nuclear reactor.

This fall we plan to visit three cities: Boston, Philadelphia, and Bratislava.

THE COLON AS A SETTING-UP DEVICE: Close encounters

Guideline. Use a colon before a word or an idea that warrants enough emphasis to be set apart from the rest of the sentence.

The new incentive program offers you something no other program offers: a free trip to Bratislava.

There is one thing we can't afford to lose: the street map of Bratislava.

THE COLON IN A COMPOUND SENTENCE: Close ties

Guideline. Use a colon in a compound sentence when the second of the two clauses is an amplification or an illustration of the first clause.

The criticisms you have raised about Brutus are of interest to me: They certainly show how committed you are to our cause. (The idea in the second half of the sentence amplifies the idea presented in the first half.)

One of the things about the plot that disturbs me is the timetable: There doesn't seem to be enough time to get

GRAMMAR

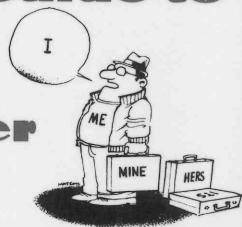
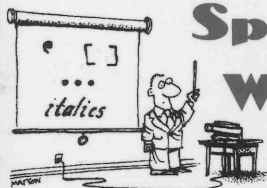
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