

An Introduction to Commas

One of the most common punctuation errors that students make is the position of commas. For clarification and review, here is a list of nine of the more general rules concerning the comma. After you have reviewed the guidelines, go on and complete the exercises.

1. Use commas to separate three or more words in succession.

Example: Elena, Josh, and Chris love sports.
Tony and Savannah bake bread, cookies, rolls, and pastries on Tuesdays.

Note: The basic pattern is A, B, and C. This pattern can be expanded to accommodate any number of elements.

Example: On Tuesdays, Tony and Dorothy bake several varieties of bread, oatmeal and raisin cookies, dinner and sweet rolls, and Danish pastries.

2. Use a comma when a 'coordinator' links two clauses without making one **more important than the other. Coordinators are: and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet.**

Example: He saw me, but he did not recognize me.
The final bell rang, so Sue rushed into the room.

Note: Each clause contains a subject and verb. Any coordinating connective may be used with a semicolon (;) if the connective joins clauses that are unusually long or already contain commas.

3. **Use a comma to indicate where the main sentence starts if the sentence is introduced by a long or substantial modifying phrase.**

Example: After an unusually quiet Sunday dinner, Father called me into his study.
Soon after the spring rains, the desert is alive with color.

Note: The phrase preceding the main sentence modifies by changing or qualifying the sentence.

4. Explanations or examples added to a complete statement are often introduced by expressions like namely, especially, such as, or for example. When they introduce material that is not a complete thought, they are usually preceded by a comma.

Example: She took several courses in business, namely accounting and marketing.

My son participated in competition sports, for example basketball and soccer.

5. Commas may be used to set off adverbial connectives from the rest of the sentence. Adverbial connectives are therefore, hence, consequently, moreover, accordingly, besides, furthermore, however, indeed, and in fact.

Examples: The food, however, was tasteless.
Accordingly, the authors of popular books tend not to separate adverbial connectives from the rest of the clause.

Note: If you remove the adverbial connective from the rest of the sentence, it would still be a complete thought.

6. Use commas to separate repeated or contrasted elements within a sentence.

Example: His family, not his job, needs more of his attention. My shirt, the one with blue and white stripes, needs to be washed.

7. Use commas to set off direct quotations from credit tags.

Example: She said, "Get lost!"
An African proverb proclaims, "The laughter of a child is the light of a house."
"Both marijuana and alcohol," Dr. Jones reports, "slow reaction times on a whole spectrum of tasks of varying complexities."

8. Two adjectives describing different qualities of the same noun may be coordinated by a comma rather than by and.

Example: She was a starved and exhausted traveler. She was a starved, exhausted traveler.
The dark and restless sky reflected my mood. The dark, restless sky reflected my mood.

9. **Use a comma or commas to set off non-restrictive modifiers. A non-restrictive modifier merely gives the reader more information but is not absolutely necessary for the meaning of the sentence.**

Example: The student, a sophomore, studies his book. The student, looking tired, studies his book. The student, sitting in the hall, studies his book.

EXERCISES: Complete the following sentences by inserting commas in the appropriate places.

1. My father who taught in both elementary and high school gave me pointers on academic success.
2. Looking straight ahead you see a body of polluted water Lake Erie.
3. Monique apparently not having any customers was sitting and reading a paper.
4. Having swallowed enough water to last me a life time I decided to leave water skiing alone.
5. Benjamin Frank my godfather was a passionate man.
6. "That was sweet of you" Linda said.
7. Kristin loves to look at books magazines and picture postcards.
8. "Give me liberty" Patrick Henry said "or give me death."
9. He wasn't a big time potter but he had enough work to keep up his studio.
10. The cat's eyes glistened and her tail twitched as she watched the unsuspecting bird.
11. The ladies brought cakes cookies and candy for the bazaar.
12. John saw the dog but he did not swerve in time.
13. Jeff and Kenyetta are in several clubs namely Students Against Drunk Drivers and the Future Homemakers of America.
14. However your position is not clear.
15. The Fall is my favorite season; however I do like Spring too.
16. "Take it or leave it" said Bill.
17. My aunt an authoritarian punished me often.

18. My grandfather objects to my habits especially gum chewing.
19. Noriko's shiny new car was parked in the driveway.
20. Most of the fights result from arguments over money but a few of them develop out of disputes associated with food.
21. Leslie believed in applauding politely to reward effort generously to reward competence frantically to reward genius.
22. Bungi jumping is a thrilling unforgettable experience.
23. Carlos took several courses in the Art department for example basic drawing and basic design.
24. Accordingly I will set out tomorrow in the same direction.
25. The "Blue Flu" was still being conducted but on a lesser scale when I returned to work.
26. Motherhood the flag and apple pie are fading symbols of the American way of life.
27. Despite the fact that the British and Americans share a common language they speak differently.
28. When meteors hit the surface of the moon they form craters like those made by volcanoes.

Answers:

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| 1. father, school, | 15. however, |
| 2. ahead, water, | 16. it," |
| 3. Monique, customers, | 17. aunt, an authoritarian, |
| 4. time, | 18. habits, |
| 5. Frank, godfather, | 19. shiny, |
| 6. you," | 20. money, |
| 7. books, magazines, | 21. applauding: effort, competence, |
| 8. liberty," said, | 22. thrilling, |
| 9. potter, | 23. department, |
| 10. glistened, | 24. Accordingly, |
| 11. cakes, cookies, | 25. conducted, scale, |
| 12. dog, | 26. Motherhood, the flag, |
| 13. clubs, | 27. language, |
| 14. However, | 28. moon, |