

Punctuation Emergency Resource Guide

COMMAS

Commas are signals to help readers understand the meaning of written sentences. In the same way as our voices convey meaning by pausing or changing in pitch, commas indicate pauses to help readers understand writing. Thus, the sound of your sentences may help indicate where commas are needed. However, sound is not always a dependable guide because not every voice pause occurs where a comma is needed and not every comma needs a voice pause. The following rules will hopefully help you to use commas correctly.

Rule #1

If your sentence contains two independent clauses, these clauses can be joined with a **COMMA** and a **FANBOYS**.

Right: We were tired, so we stopped the game.

Please note that the comma comes **BEFORE** the conjunction, not after it.

Rule #2

If your sentence contains two independent clauses, these clauses can be joined with a **SEMICOLON**, a conjunctive adverb (however, therefore, consequently, etc.) and a **COMMA**.

Right: We were tired; therefore, we stopped the game.

Please note that the semicolon shows where the first clause stops. The comma indicates where the next idea begins.

Rule #3

If your sentence begins with a dependent clause, a **COMMA** is needed to separate the dependent clause from the independent clause.

Right: While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.

Please note that the comma shows where the dependent clause is stopping. The dependent clause is introducing the independent clause.

Rule #4

If your sentence begins with an independent clause, **NO COMMA** is needed.

Right: The cat scratched at the door while I was eating.

Please note that the independent clause flows into the dependent clause, so **NO COMMA** is needed.

Wrong: She was late, because her alarm clock was broken.

Right: She was late because her alarm clock was broken.

Rule #5

If the dependent clause interrupts the independent clause, then the dependent clause must be set off with **COMMAS**.

Right: The new sailboat, while being put into the water, turned over and sank.

Please note that the dependent clause in this sentence is not necessary to understand the independent clause; therefore, it has a **COMMA** at the beginning and at the end of the clause to show the reader that it is removable and not necessary.

Rule #6

If a sentence begins with an introductory word, phrase or clause, that introduction must be separated with a **COMMA**.

If a sentence begins with a prepositional phrase that is more than five words in length, the phrase must be separated from the main idea with a **COMMA**.

Right: Well, perhaps he meant no harm.

Right: In the middle of a long, dull movie, I decided to get some popcorn.

Right: After they retired, they moved to Mexico.

Please note that each of these sentences is introduced by a word, phrase, or clause. The reader's main need is the idea, not the introduction.

Rule #7

If a sentence contains a nonessential phrase or clause (add extra information that can be removed from a sentence without disturbing the meaning), that nonessential element must be separate with a **COMMA(S)**.

Right: Sandwich Supreme, one of the first of a new chain of gourmet sandwich shops, serve six different types of cheese sandwiches with a choice of three different types of bread.

Please note that the phrase in the commas is not necessary to understand the main idea of the sentence, so it must be set apart.

Rule #8

If a sentence contains an essential element (information that is crucial to the understanding of the sentence), **NO COMMAS** are needed.

Right: Students who cheat harm only themselves.

Removing "who cheat" would make the sentence incomplete.

Wrong: Students harm only themselves.

Therefore, the phrase "who cheat" is essential to the total understanding of the sentence.

Rule #9

If a sentence contains a **which** clause, a **COMMA(S)** is needed.

Right: The NCAA tournament, which is always held in March, is about to begin.

The information in the **which** clause is not necessary to the understanding of the sentence.

Rule #10

If a sentence contains a *that* clause, **NO COMMAS** are needed.

Right: I will return the sweater that I borrowed after I wear it again tonight.

The information in the *that* clause is necessary to the understanding of the sentence.

Rule #11

If a sentence contains an *appositive* (a word group that follows a noun that identifies or explains the noun), the appositive must have commas because the information is not necessary to the sentence.

Right: Uncle Ike, a doctor, smoked too much even though he continued to warn his patients not to smoke.

The word group, “a doctor,” is not necessary to the understanding of the main idea of the sentence.

Rule #12

If a sentence contains a list or series of items, the items must be separated with **COMMAS**.

Right: Would you prefer the poster printed in yellow, blue, green, or purple?

Right: He first spoke to Julio, then called his roommate, and finally phoned me.

Right: She never dreamed she would be in the movies, she had not even tried out for a part, and she was sure she did not have enough talent to act.

Please note that in each sentence, the items are separated with a **COMMA** so that there is no confusion for the reader.

Rule #13

If a sentence with a list or series of items contains the words such as or especially, **NO COMMAS** are needed to introduce the list. Those words are doing the introducing.

Wrong: There are several kinds of dark bread from which to choose, such as, whole wheat, rye, oatmeal, pumpernickel, and bran bread.

Right: There are several kinds of dark bread from which to choose, such as whole wheat, rye, oatmeal, pumpernickel, and bran bread.

Rule #14

If a sentence contains two consecutive adjectives that describe the same noun, a **COMMA** must be used to separate the adjectives.

Right: Ella is a happy, healthy baby.

Please note that either of the adjectives could be used to describe the noun.

However, if the two consecutive adjectives **DO NOT** describe the same noun, **NO COMMA** is needed.

Right: Leslie is wearing a bright green sweater today.

“Bright” is describing “green,” and “green” is describing the sweater.

Rule #15

If a sentence contains a date, address, geographical name, or number it needs **COMMA(S)**.

Right: The order was shipped out on September 2, 2003, and not received until May 12, 2004.

If the date used is simply a month and year, **NO COMMA** is needed.

Right: June 1960 was a very good month for my family.

Right: You can write to Jim Johnson, 1436 Westwood Drive, Birlingham, Idaho 83900, for more information.

Each item of the address must be set apart with **COMMAS**. Please note that a **COMMA** is not used to separate state and zip code.

Right: The planning committee has decided that Chicago, Illinois, will be the site for this year's conference and Washington, D.C., for next year's meeting.

When using a city and a state, a **COMMA** must come after the state if the sentence is continuing.

Right: They do not stock all 16,000 titles in the inventory.

Numbers that are important to a sentence need to be expressed as clearly as possible to avoid confusion.

Rule #16

If a quotation is to be used in the sentence, it must be set apart with a **COMMA**.

Right: Becky said, "I will see you tomorrow."

Right: "I was able," she explained, "to complete the job on time."

Rule #17

If there may be any confusion in the reading of the sentence, use a **COMMA**.

Confusing: To John Harrison had been a sort of idol.

Clear: To John, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

Confusing: On Thursday morning orders will be handled by Jim.

Clear: On Thursday, morning orders will be handled by Jim.

OR

Clear: On Thursday morning, orders will be handled by Jim.

Confusing: He was merely ignorant not stupid.

Clear: He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

Confusing: You are one of the senator's right-hand people are you not?

Clear: You are one of the senator's right-hand people, are you not?

Rule #18

NEVER separate subject and verb with a **COMMA**.

Wrong: Eighteen year olds in most states, are considered adults.

Right: Eighteen year olds in most states are considered adults.

Rule #19

NEVER use a **COMMA** with a **FANBOYS** if the sentence **DOES NOT** contain two complete thoughts.

Wrong: We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study.

Right: We laid out our music and snacks and began to study.

Rule #20

When in doubt about the use of a COMMA(S), ASK THE INSTRUCTOR!!!!