

WHAT IS A COMMA?

The comma is a punctuation mark that has many different roles. As a general statement, commas separate parts of sentences, aid with readability, and signal the reader.

COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

The comma can function to join two complete thoughts together into a single sentence through a coordinating conjunction. A complete thought is followed by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (e.g., but, and, so, nor, for and yet) to join two complete thoughts together. Without a coordinating conjunction, some sentences become run-ons.

Incorrect: The schedule says practice is at 9:30 this morning but I have class at that time.

Correct: The schedule says practice is at 9:30 this morning, but I have class at that time.

Incorrect: Today I want to go to the store so I am going to finish my homework early.

Correct: today I want to go to the store, so I am going to finish my homework early.

Notice that each these sentences' two parts can be read alone and still make sense without the other half. This is because they are complete thoughts. Pay attention to where the coordinating conjunction is and how the comma comes before the conjunction.

INTRODUCTORY PHRASES AND CLAUSES

The comma often signifies introductory clauses and phrases. This means that the beginning portion of the sentence does not contain the subject and verb, but is used to give context or extra information to the sentence. The comma comes at the end of the introductory clause or phrase.

Incorrect: In case I forget please text me your arrival time tomorrow.

Correct: In case I forget, please text me your arrival time tomorrow.

If the first sentence is read without the comma it is unclear where the main part of the sentence starts. The second sentence is much easier to read and understand.

LISTS

Commas also separate items in lists, making it easier to decipher between items and read.

Incorrect: I need to buy apples bananas pears and cucumbers from the produce aisle.

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Correct: I need to buy apples, bananas, pears, and cucumbers from the produce aisle.

SEPARATING ADJECTIVES

An adjective is a word that describes a noun. If a noun has more than one listed adjective, commas can function to separate the adjectives from each other. Writers only use the commas in place of the word and when it comes to separating adjectives. See the examples below for clarification.

- I like ripe, fresh, yellow bananas. (versus) I like ripe and fresh and yellow bananas.
- I need five purple wax crayons. (versus) I need five and purple and wax crayons.

Notice in the first example, each of the commas could be replaced with the word and. In that case, the commas are appropriate to be placed between the adjectives. The second example does not make sense when the word and is inserted between all the adjectives; therefore, the commas are omitted.

NONESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Sometimes in the middle of a sentence information is added to give clarity or more insight into the topic of the sentence. If the information is not necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence, the phrase is surrounded by a comma on each side.

- Every year, except two years ago, my uncle invites us to his house for a party.
- My mom told me to pack a lunch that did not have to be refrigerated.

In the first sentence, it is not necessary to know that the uncle did not invite them to a party; because, the point of the sentence is that he invites them every year. In the second sentence, the mom is giving a specific instruction that the food in the lunch not be refrigerated. Even though this is added information, it is information that is necessary to understand the message of the sentence, so no comma is used.

TRANSITIONS

Commas help with transition words and phrases in order to cue the reader that a writer is moving on or making a connection. There are many words and phrases that fit into this category—therefore, however, for example, in conclusion, etc.

- I do not like vegetables; therefore, I will not enjoy this vegetarian dish.
- I really enjoy working with children, but on the other hand, they exhaust me

OTHER FUNCTIONS

There are more functions of commas besides these; however, these are the common uses that most writers will likely come across frequently in their writing.