

## Punctuation: *Commas*

A comma is used to indicate a slight break (or pause) between different parts of a sentence. When used correctly, commas clarify the meaning of sentences by grouping and separating words, phrases, and clauses. Often, students are uncertain of where or when to use commas, and may either overuse them, or avoid them altogether. Knowing the basic rules of proper comma use can help students feel more confident in utilizing this important piece of punctuation. Commas are mainly used in the following instances:

1. To separate items in a series
2. To set off introductory or “extra” material in a sentence
3. Before and after an appositive
4. Before one of the FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) used to connect two independent clauses
5. After a dependent clause when it comes first in a complex sentence
6. To set off direct quotation from the rest of a sentence
7. To note a noun of direct address
8. With dates, addresses, openings/closings of letters, and numbers

Below are more detailed explanations and examples for each of the eight instances listed above in which commas are used.

### 1) Commas to Separate Items in a Series:

*Do you drink tea with milk, lemon, or honey?*

*Lola woke from a restless, nightmare-filled slumber.*

The commas used in the two sentences above are examples of how to properly separate items in a series using commas. Without a comma, a reader might think that the writer is talking about “milk lemon” and honey, rather than milk, lemon, *or* honey. In the second sentence, the comma is used between two descriptive words. Commas are used between two descriptive words **only** if the word **and** inserted in-between the words sounds natural. In this case, the comma is used correctly because we can write *Lola woke from a restless and nightmare-filled slumber*, and it would still make sense.

### 2) Commas to Set off Introductory Material or “Extra” Material:

*Looking up at the sky, I saw an asteroid hurtling toward us.*

*I love to cook and eat Mexican food, especially tamales and menudo.*

The comma in the first sentence is used to set off the introductory material (*Looking up at the sky*), whereas the comma in the second sentence is used to set off extra material at the end of a sentence (*especially tamales and menudo*).

If the introductory material is brief, the comma is sometimes omitted.

### **3) Commas before and after an Appositive and Interrupting Words and Phrases:**

*The reality show, at long last, has been cancelled.*

*Ian, our new neighbor, cooks phenomenal desserts.*

An appositive is a noun or pronoun set beside another noun or pronoun to explain or identify it. Commas are used before and after appositives. If the appositive is removed, the sentence will still be grammatically correct. In the first sentence, *at long last* interrupts the phrases *The reality show* and *has been cancelled*. Taking out the phrase *at long last*, the sentence would read *The reality show has been cancelled*, which would be grammatically correct. The same concept applies to the second sentence, in which *our new neighbor* is the appositive flanked by commas.

### **4) Commas with a FANBOYS between independent clauses:**

*They smell rancid, so they should be easy to find.*

*My cat loved to play, so I bought him a new toy.*

Use a comma between two complete thoughts, also known as independent clauses, usually connected by one of the FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). The comma will be inserted right before FANBOYS.

It is important to be careful not to use a comma in sentences that have **one** subject and a **double** verb. An example of this would be *Kelly will go to a movie tonight and forget all about tomorrow's test*. The second phrase (*forget all about tomorrow's test*) is not an independent clause, or complete thought. Commas are only used in sentences made up of two complete thoughts (each one having a subject and verb). If it is a complete thought, you need a comma. If it is not a complete thought, do not use a comma.

### **5) Commas in a Complex Sentence**

*After she graduated with a master's in marketing, she applied for jobs at Amazon and Yelp.*

A complex sentence consists of a dependent and an independent clause. When the dependent clause comes first, it is followed by a comma and then the independent clause.

### **6) Commas to Set off Direct Quotation(s) from the Rest of a Sentence:**

*Her husband yelled, "Don't forget to buy bread!"*

*"Anyway," she said, "I have to leave now."*

Commas are used to set off the “he said/she said/they said” clause from the rest of the sentence. The comma always goes **before** the quotation marks when setting off a direct quotation from the rest of a sentence.

### 7) Commas to Note a Noun of Direct Address:

*Tina, go to bed if you are tired.*

*Mr. Lopez, your account has been breached.*

Similar to the rule regarding commas to set off introductory or “extra” materials with a comma, a comma is used when a person is being addressed. The person being addressed is called a noun of direct address. If we were to delete the nouns of direct address (in this case, *Tina* and *Mr. Lopez*), the sentences would still be grammatically correct, albeit less specific. *Go to bed if you are tired* and *Your account has been breached* are both complete sentences on their own, but the addition of the names with commas placed at the end indicate the specific person being addressed.

### 8) Commas with Dates, Addresses, Openings/Closings of Letters, Numbers:

Dates: *Today is March 5, 2017, and we are opening our latest store.*

Addresses: *He lives at 8181 Twin Peaks Road, Anacortes, Washington, 98221.*

Openings/Closings of letters or emails:

*Dear Mary,*

*We are writing you to let you know that your order has been delayed. Please contact us if you have any further questions or comments.*

*Sincerely,*

*Leroy Brown, Amazon Shipping Department & Services*

Commas are used in these instances for clarity, distinction, and formality. For example, if the reader were to see *He lives at 8181 Twin Peaks Road Anacortes Washington 98221*, he or she might be confused as to where the city name begins, and the street address ends.

### A few extra tips and tricks...

- Set a title off when it follows a name. This is a form of an appositive. (*Theodore Roosevelt, former President of the United States, was a big lover of nature and the great outdoors.*)
- When you omit the day of the month, also omit the comma (*July 1776*)
- The **oxford comma** is sometimes used, and other times ignored. Proponents of its use argues it establishes more clarity that may be lost if it is omitted. In some cases, clarity remains essentially the same with or without the oxford comma, like

in the sentence *Please bring me a pencil, notebook and eraser*. However, other cases, such as in the case of Stephen Curry's wife, Ayesha Curry's Twitter bio, which reads: *Ayesha Curry, cookbook author, social media maven, mother and wife to NBA superstar Stephen Curry*. In this case, the oxford comma would let the reader know that Ayesha is not Stephen Curry's wife *and* mother!