The Writing Centre’s Guide to Commas
The Beginning

Do you feel comfortable using commas in your writing?

If not, you’re not alone. Just google the term “comma use” and you will come up with more than 3 million hits (496,000 if just looking at Canadian webpages)!

Some have been taught to use a comma whenever it’s necessary to pause, as when speaking; however, because we pause when speaking to breathe or swallow, it’s not reliable to use this rule because we are reading, not speaking.

One general rule to remember is to use a comma to guide the reader through the sentence and prevent misreading.

Let’s see if we can make using commas simple.
Rule 1: The Separation Comma

• Use a comma to **separate elements in a series or list** of three or more things.

• You may have learned that the last comma in a list of items is not necessary.

• Sometimes, however, the last two items in your series will fuse into one if you don’t use this separation comma. Using a comma between **all the items in a series, including the last two**, avoids problems.

• This last comma is called a “serial comma” or “Oxford Comma”.
Rule 1: The Separation Comma

• My favourite uses of the Internet are sending emails, surfing the Web, and using chat rooms.

• Required subjects are Math, English, Bookkeeping, and Business Law.

• Walk up the hill, turn left, go two blocks, and you’ll be there!
Rule 2: The “FANBOYS” Comma

- Using a comma with a coordinating conjunction to separate two independent clauses.

- When using these, remember to place the comma before the coordinating conjunction.

What are coordinating conjunctions?

, For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So
Rule 2: The “FANBOYS” Comma

I’m not speaking to her, so you’ll have to tell her.

Our team is very good, but their team is better.

I can’t make it to class, yet I feel I should go.

The public seems eager for some kind of gun control legislation, but the government is obviously too timid to enact any truly effective means.
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Here you can see the comma and coordinating conjunction.
Rule 3: The Introductory Comma

**Use a comma to set off introductory elements**

- This happens after a word or group of words that comes before an independent clause.

**For Example**

- Anxious about the upcoming winter, settlers began to bicker among themselves about supplies.

- In the year 1644, nearly half the settlers died of starvation.

- Charlie, you aren’t paying attention!

- Until he got his promotion, he was quite a nice person.
Rule 4: The Coordinating Comma

Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives.

• Coaches grew tired of running practices in the draft, dreary gym.

• That distinguished, good looking professor is a real hard worker.

• The airy, inexpensive apartment is in a great part of town.

Do not insert a comma when the first adjective describes the combination of the next adjective or noun.

• That beautiful sports car has a built-in GPS device.
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Use a comma to separate **coordinate adjectives**.

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Rule 4: The Coordinating Comma

Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives.

HINT:
If you can put either a “but” or an “and” between the adjectives, you should put a comma between them.

For example:

“an expensive and modern house” ✗
should be written

“an expensive, modern house” ✓
Rule 5: The Contrary Comma

- Use a comma to set off elements that express a contrast or a turn in the sentence.
- Try to develop an awareness of other words that trigger contrary commas, words like instead, rather, and although.

Examples:
- The house was cute, but too expensive for the newlyweds.
- They were looking for something practical, not luxurious.
- No one paid any attention to me, not even to get me a glass of water.
- Art is not difficult because it wishes to be, rather because it wishes to be art.
- The teacher facilitates learning and collaborates with the learners, instead of dispensing information and testing students on it.
Rule 6: The Formal Title Comma

- Use a comma to set off states and countries, years (in FULL date), titles, etc.

Examples:

- The conference is in Chicago, Illinois.
- Their wedding was set for August 5, 2005.
- Tashanda Klondike, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, submitted the final report.
Rule 7: The Quoted Language Comma

- Use a comma to set off quotes language.

Examples:

- Frost’s poem begins with the lines, “Some say the world will end in fire, some say ice.”

- “We can’t see into the future,” said the president, “but we have to prepare for it nonetheless.”
Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

• Use a comma to set off parenthetical elements.

• This is the most difficult comma rule to apply.

• This is “added information” or something that can be removed from the sentence without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.

Deciding what is “added information” and what is essential is sometimes very difficult.
Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

Examples:

**Appositive Phrase:**
- Can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence or making it ambiguous

Robert Frost, perhaps America’s most beloved poet, died when he was 88 years old.

**Absolute Phrase:**
- Is treated as a parenthetical element

Frankly, it doesn’t matter.
Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

Examples:

**Addressed person’s (or people) name**
- Is always parenthetical

I am warning you, good citizens of Toronto, this vote is crucial for the future of our city.

**Interjection**
- Is treated as a parenthetical element

Excuse me, but there are, of course, many points of view that we must consider before voting.
Let’s Review the different rules:
1. The Separation Comma
2. The “FANBOYS” Comma
3. The Introductory Comma
4. The Coordinating Comma
5. The Contrary Comma
6. The Formal Title Comma
7. The Quoted Language Comma
8. The Parenthetical Comma

You’re finished!

**If you found this helpful, please speak to one of our Writing Centre tutors on ways to view these slides on your own time.**