

Do you feel comfortable knowing where to place a comma when you write? Most of us don't, so you're in good company! In *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, the author Randolph Quirk says the comma "is the most flexible of all punctuation marks in the range of its use and it has eluded grammarians' attempts to categorize its uses satisfactorily" (1972, p. 1058). Furthermore, Google the term "comma use," and you will come up with more than 3 million hits (only 496 000 if just looking at Canadian web pages)!

Some people have been taught to use a comma whenever it's necessary to pause, as when speaking; however, because we pause to breathe or to swallow, it's not very reliable to apply this rule for using a comma. There is one general rule you can follow, which helps to simplify comma use: **Use a comma to guide the reader through the sentence and to prevent misreading.**

Let's see if we can make using commas—when to use them and when not to use them—simple.

Rule #1: The Separation Comma

Use a comma to separate the elements in a series of three or more things.

My favourite uses of the Internet are sending e-mail, 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!

You may have learned that the last comma 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 this problem. (By the way, a piece of trivia: the last comma is called a "serial comma" or the "Oxford comma." Both the MLA and APA handbooks suggest students use the serial comma when listing three or more items in a sentence)

Rule #2: The "FANBOYS" Comma

Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to separate two independent clauses.

The public seems eager for some kind of gun control legislation, but the legislature is obviously too timid to enact any truly effective means.

I'm not speaking to her, so you'll have to tell her!

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

If the two independent clauses are **brief** and **nicely balanced**, this comma may be omitted, but putting in the comma is always correct.

Our team is very good but their team is better.
This sentence is brief and nicely balanced.

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

Even though brief and balanced, putting the comma in this sentence isn't wrong.

Rule #3: The Courtesy Comma

Use a comma to set off **introductory elements** (that is, after a word or group of words that comes before an independent clause).

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

In the winter of 1644, nearly half the settlers died of starvation or exposure.

Charlie, you aren't paying attention!

Until he got his promotion, he was quite a nice person.

If the introductory element is brief and the sentence can be read easily without a comma, it can be omitted. Although one can argue that all commas are meant to clarify matters for the reader, only use one if necessary to prevent a misreading.

In 1649 the settlers abandoned their initial outpost. (No comma.)

Because prisoners had tried to escape, a fence was constructed. (Comma used to avoid misreading.)

By noon, time had run out. (Comma used to avoid misreading.)

Rule #4: The “Coordinating” Comma

Use a comma to separate **coordinate adjectives**.

Coaches grew weary of running practices in the drafty, dreary gym.

That distinguished, good looking professor is a real hard marker.

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 and the noun.

That beautiful sports car has a built-in GPS device.

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 as “an expensive, modern house.”

Rule #5: The Contrary (or Contrast) Comma

Use a comma to set off elements that express a **contrast** or a **turn** in the sentence.

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.

In general, try to develop an awareness of other words that trigger contrary commas, words like **instead**, **rather**, and **though/although**. Also note that the contrary comma accounts for the fact that we often find commas in front of the word “but,” even when it isn't linking two full sentences.

Art is not difficult because it wishes to be, rather because it wishes to be art.

Furthermore, 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.

The conference was originally set for Geneva, Switzerland, but was then rescheduled for Chicago, Illinois.

Their wedding date was set for August 5, 2000, in the college chapel at Newton, Massachusetts.

Tashanda Klondike, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, submitted the committee's final report.

Rule #7: The Quoted Language Comma

Use a comma to set off **quoted language**.

"Fire when ready, Gridley," the Admiral said.

Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" begins with the lines, "Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice."

"We can't see into the future," said the President, "but we have to prepare for it nonetheless."

Rule #8: The Parenthetical Comma Pair

Use a comma to set off **parenthetical elements**. This is the most difficult rule in comma usage (which is why we saved it for last!). A parenthetical element is "added information," something that can be removed from a sentence without changing the essential meaning of that sentence. Deciding what is "added information" and what is essential is sometimes very difficult.

When an **appositive phrase** can be removed from a sentence without changing its meaning or making it ambiguous: *Robert Frost, perhaps America's most beloved poet, died when he was 88 years old.*

An **absolute phrase** is treated as a parenthetical element: *Frankly, it doesn't matter.*

An **addressed person's (or people's) name** is always parenthetical: *I am warning you, good citizens of Toronto, this vote is crucial to the future of our city.*

An **interjection** is treated as a parenthetical element: *Excuse me, but there are, of course, many points of view that we must consider before voting.*

Last Rule

Don't overuse commas! When a comma is needed, use it; otherwise, do without.