

Commas

Commas are punctuation marks that provide sentences with necessary structure and clarity. Using commas may at times be confusing (or even mysterious), but proper comma placement follows a logical and predictable pattern.

Note that American English and British English use commas differently.

Introductory elements:

An **introductory element** is a word or phrase, followed by a comma, which appears at the beginning of a sentence. Introductory elements can be adverbs, verbal phrases, prepositional phrases, or subordinate clauses.

Adverb: *Nevertheless, Einstein's theory of relativity remains the achievement he is best known for.*

Verbal phrase: *Regarding fuel economy, our new engine is superior to similar technologies to date.*

Prepositional phrase: *In contrast to Smith's procedure, our synthetic strategy affords the product in high yield.*

Subordinate clause: *Although this issue has been addressed in previous works, it has yet to be solved.*

In some cases, especially in British English, this comma is omitted following single words or short, common phrases.

In 1922 Albert Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for discovering the photoelectric effect.

Whether or not you decide to use this comma, the most important thing is to remain consistent throughout your text.

Non-defining relative clauses:

Commas must be placed before and after **non-defining relative clauses** (see Relative Clauses), which provide supplemental information.

The car, which was invented in 1886, has revolutionized personal transport.

As the name implies, **defining relative clauses** define a noun and do not require commas.

The process that preserves remnants of life in a mineral form is called fossilization.

Independent coordinate clauses:

When **coordinating conjunctions**—*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* (FANBOYS)—are used to connect two **independent clauses** (two complete “thoughts,” which could exist as two separate sentences), a comma is placed before the conjunction.

The new synthesis produced higher yields, yet it was deemed too laborious.

A **comma splice**, resulting in a **run-on sentence**, is an error that occurs when two independent clauses are connected only by a comma.

Incorrect: *Your frustration was understandable, the waiter was quite rude.*

Coordinate adjectives:

Depending on what is meant, commas may be required to separate **consecutive adjectives**. Without commas, an adjective applies to the noun as well as any adjectives which follow that adjective, as if they were a single entity. In the following example, the adjective *new* describes the noun *efficient engine*.

The company launched a new efficient engine.

With commas, all adjectives apply just to the noun. Now, both *new* and *efficient* describe engine.

The company launched a new, efficient engine.

Lists:

In a list of three or more items, a comma is required after all but the last two items.

Nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide and benzene are among the many toxins of car exhaust.

Especially in American English, placing an additional comma before the coordinating conjunction (e.g. *and*, *or*) is common. This is referred to as the **Oxford comma** or **series comma**, and is commonly recommended to separate the individual items in the list.

Nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide, and benzene are among the many toxins of car exhaust.

Whether or not you decide to use the Oxford comma, the most important thing is to remain consistent throughout your text.

Interrupting elements:

Commas must be placed before and after an **interrupting element**, which is a word, phrase, or clause inserted in a sentence in such a way as to disrupt the normal grammatical flow of subject, verb, and object. (A non-defining relative clause, for example, can be an interrupting element.)

Bacterial cells, by contrast, do not possess membrane-enclosed organelles.

Kevin Bacon, the star of Footloose, is my favorite actor.

Note that interrupting elements can also appear at the ends of sentences.

Airplane engines run on kerosene, not gasoline.

Subordinate clauses:

If a **subordinate clause** appears at the beginning of a sentence, it must be followed by a comma.

If it starts to rain, the match may be canceled.

Usually a comma is not placed before a subordinate clause which appears at the end of a sentence, however, many exceptions exist. For example, a comma is placed to indicate contrast.

The climate change debate usually centers around carbon dioxide, even though methane is more harmful.

Numbers and dates:

In English, the decimal is indicated with a period, whereas commas are used to separate sets of three digits.

An earthquake registering as 5.0 on the Richter scale has a shaking amplitude 10,000 times that of one registering as 1.0.

Dates are usually presented according to the formula month day, year.

I was born on June 4, 2013.