

Punctuation Rules: Commas

Commas separate structural elements of sentences in order to increase the readability of a text.

In general, commas are to be used whenever the lack of a comma would lead to misunderstandings and confusion.

1. Commas with indicators and introductory elements

There is always a comma **before**

- these **7 coordinating conjunctions** linking independent clauses: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet
- these **6 introductory words followed by a series**: namely, that is, e.g., i.e., for example, for instance

Commas are necessary **after** these introductory elements:

- **Introductory words**: yes, well, now, however, still, furthermore, meanwhile
- **Introductory phrases** with more than three words are separated by commas
- **Introductory clauses with starter words**: after, although, as, because, before, if, since, though, until, when, while

❗ **NOTE:** There is **no comma** after the main clause when it is followed by a subordinate/dependent clause! There is also never a comma whenever the comma would separate the subject from the predicate!

2. Commas within a list of three or more

Three or more words, phrases, and clauses are always set off with commas.

❗ **NOTE:** There is **no comma** after the main clause when it is followed by a subordinate/dependent clause! There is also never a comma whenever the comma would separate the subject from the predicate!

3. Commas with quotations and questions

Quotations and questions are always separated by commas from the rest of the sentence.

! Watch out for:

after, although, as, because, before, if, since, though, until, when, while

and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet

therefore, however
yes, well, now, however, still, furthermore, meanwhile

namely, that is, e.g., i.e., for example, for instance



4. Commas with nonessential or interrupting elements

Nonessential elements can be left out or replaced within the sentence, and still the rest of the sentence does make sense. Nonessential elements are always separated by commas.

Interrupting words (e.g. therefore, however), clauses, or phrases are always surrounded by commas.

❗ **NOTE:** There are **no commas** surrounding relative clauses beginning with **that** (after nouns and after verbs expressing mental actions) as these clauses are always essential.

5. Commas before and after free modifiers

Free modifiers are phrases separated by commas that can be placed anywhere in the sentence, and that refer to the middle or the beginning of the sentence. Free modifiers cannot be left out without changing the sense of the sentence!

6. Commas between coordinate elements

Coordinate adjectives are separated by commas. You can tell if an adjective is coordinate by trying to put the adjectives in reverse order or testing if you can add the word "and" in between the adjectives. Both is only possible with coordinate adjectives and does not work with non-coordinate adjectives.

Contrasted coordinate elements at the end of a sentence are also separated by commas.

7. Commas with geographical names, dates, addresses, as well as titles/degrees and names

In general, commas are always used to set off all geographical names, items in dates, addresses, as well as titles/degrees and names – with the following **exceptions**:

- There is never a comma between month and day, or between street name and number.
- If there is no date mentioned, but only the month and the year, then there is no comma needed.
- With the two-letter capitalized form of states, there is no comma needed after the state.
- There are no commas needed with Jr. and Sr., and there are no commas allowed with I, II, III etc.
- Addresses on envelopes are written without any punctuation.

8. Commas after -ly adjectives

When an adjective ending with -ly is used with another adjective, they are always separated by commas.

❗ **NOTE:** If the "-ly word" can be used alone with the word, it is an adjective. If not, then the "-ly word" is an adverb.

9. Commas after weak clauses followed by a strong clause

If a weak clause is followed by a strong clause, they are set off with commas.

❗ **NOTE:** If a strong clause is followed by a weak clause, they are **NOT** separated by commas.



Sources

This factsheet has been compiled from the sources stated on the right. All information is supplied without guarantee.

1. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu>
2. Jane Straus (2008): The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation, 10th ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.