

One common area where students seem to struggle is with comma usage. Have you ever said this: I think I should put a comma here, but I'm not sure. Is there a rule for this?

Carrell, Wilson, and Forlini (2004) stated that there are two basic uses for commas: "(1) Commas can be used *to separate* similar items and (2) one or more commas can be used to *set off* a single item at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. Do not use a comma unless there is a comma rule for it" (p. 658). Here are the comma rules that they include in their grammar text:

### 1. Commas with compound sentences

A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses joined by a conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet*). A comma is placed after the first independent clause and before the conjunction. An *independent clause* can stand on its own as a complete sentence; it contains a subject and a verb.

The dance was advertised as an informal affair, but most of the students dressed in their Sunday best.

Note that no comma is needed in the following sentence: "Much food is put through a process called irradiation so that most of the bacteria on the food is killed by radiation" (p. 659). The part of the sentence following the word 'so' is not an independent clause. If you removed the word 'that', it would be a compound sentence.

NOTE: If you have two independent clauses in a sentence that are not separated by a conjunction, a semicolon should be inserted after the first clause.

The students in the first seven rows were in the baccalaureate program; those in the last three rows were in the master's program.

ALSO: When two independent clauses are separated by a conjunctive adverb (however, furthermore, nevertheless, etc.) a semicolon precedes the conjunctive adverb and a comma follows it.

The dance was advertised as an informal affair; nevertheless, most of the students dressed in their Sunday best.

### 2. Commas between items in a series

A series is a string of "three or more similar items. These items may be words, phrases, or clauses [and] must be separated by commas" (p. 660). As a rule of thumb, you will have one fewer comma than the number of items in the list. You should insert a comma before the conjunction.

The student's study objectives were to read the chapter, to complete the practice problems, and to review the notes from the previous lecture.

The items in the series should be parallel in structure, so that if each item is placed in the sentence by itself, it will make sense:

The student's study objective was *to read the chapter*.

The student's study objective was *to complete the practice problems*.

The student's study objective was *to review the notes from the previous lecture*.

Exceptions:

a. "When each item in the series is joined to the next item by a conjunction, no commas are necessary"

Super markets and grocery stores and restaurants all sell a variety of foods to consumers (p. 660).

- b. “Commas are not necessary between pairs of items that are thought of as a single item”

I asked for ham and eggs, coffee and cream, and bread and butter (p. 660).

### 3. Comma Use with Adjectives.

“An adjective is a word used to describe a noun or pronoun or to give a noun or pronoun a more specific meaning.” An adjective tells what kind, which one, how many, or how much about the noun or pronoun (p. 380).

If two adjectives of equal rank are used to describe a noun, they are separated by a comma. If the adjectives are of equal rank, their order can be reversed without changing the meaning of the sentence or sounding awkward:

The girl’s *curly, red* hair was stuffed under her stocking cap.

Or: The girl’s *red, curly* hair was stuffed under her stocking cap.

If the adjectives must remain in the order in which they are used, do not use a comma.

There are *many new* programs being offered at the college.

But not: There are *new many* programs being offered at the college.

Hacker and Sommers (2011) offer an alternative method for differentiating when you should use commas with adjectives.

- When two or more adjectives each modify a noun separately, they are called **coordinate** adjectives; you should use a comma between coordinate adjectives. In the sample above, the adjectives *curly* and *red* both modify the noun *hair* separately and require the use of a comma: *curly hair, red hair*. An additional test is that adjectives are coordinate and require commas if they can be connected with the word *and*: The girl’s *curly and red hair* was . . .
- **Cumulative** adjectives do not modify the noun separately but build upon each other, each modifying a larger word group. Cumulative adjectives cannot be connected with *and* should not be separated by commas. In the example above, the adjective *new* modifies *programs* and the adjective *many* modifies *new programs*. The same holds true for this example from Hacker and Sommers: *Ira ordered a rich chocolate layer cake*; each adjective builds on the preceding adjective. Additionally, you would not separate the adjectives with the word *and*: *There are many and new programs* . . .

### 4. Commas after Introductory Material

Commas are usually needed to set off introductory material (a word, phrase, or clause) from the rest of the sentence.

#### a. Introductory Words

1. Introductory words: Yes, I will study with you tonight.
2. Nouns of direct address: Judy, will you meet me at the library at 6 p.m. to study?
3. Common expressions: Of course, I can be there by six.
4. Introductory adverbs: Evidently, the students were well prepared for the test.

#### b. Introductory Phrases

1. Prepositional phrases (of 4 or more words):

A preposition is a word that relates a noun or pronoun to another word in the sentence (p. 402).

Examples of prepositions are

aboard	beyond	over
about	by	past
above	concerning	regarding
across	despite	round
after	down	since
against	during	than
along	for	through
amid	from	throughout
among	in	till
around	inside	to
as	into	toward
at	like	under
atop	near	unlike
before	of	until
behind	off	up
below	on	upon
beneath	onto	with
beside	out	within
between	outside	without

Some prepositions are made up of two or more words and are called compound prepositions; these include *according to*, *because of*, *in regard to*, *next to*, *prior to*, and others. A prepositional phrase always ends with a noun or pronoun (p. 464).

Ex: The teacher stood beside the podium as she lectured.

A prepositional phrase (beside the podium) contains a preposition (beside) and a noun or pronoun (podium). The noun or pronoun is the object of the prepositional phrase and there may be additional words that modify the object:

The teacher stood beside the tall, brightly-colored podium as she lectured.

**Rule:** Use a comma to set off an introductory prepositional phrase of four or more words.

For example: On a typical work day, you will find me at my desk by 8 a.m. (This sentence actually contains three prepositional phrases—can you find them?)

However, there is no comma after this prepositional phrase:

At dinnertime there is little conversation until dessert is served.

This introductory prepositional phrase (At dinnertime) is less than four words, so no comma is needed.

## 2. Participial phrases

“A participle is a form of a verb that can act as an adjective” (p. 456); that is, it is used to modify a noun or pronoun. Participles are either present (verbs ending in *-ing*), or past (verbs ending in *-ed* or having an irregular ending, such as broken, chosen, spoken, burnt, etc.). For example, the *spoken* word, the *chugging* train, the *wounded* soldier. A comma follows a participial phrase:

Dividing the project into smaller units, the students were able to complete the assignment before it was due.

A participial phrase that comes at the end of the sentence should also be separated by a comma.

Students often delay starting a project, thinking there is still plenty of time for it.

### 3. Infinitive phrases

“An infinitive is a form of a verb that generally appears with the word *to* and acts as a noun, adjective, or adverb. . . . An infinitive always ends with a verb” (p. 463, 464). For example,

All students need *to study*.

Occasionally, the “*to*” is understood, as in:

Volunteer labor helped *build* the Habitat for Humanity home.

An infinitive phrase at the beginning of a sentence needs to be followed by a comma:

To irrigate the wound correctly, the student was required to gather several items. (This sentence contains two infinitive phrases.)

### c. Introductory Adverb Clauses

“Adverb clauses show the relationship between ideas by telling *where, when, how, why, to what extent, or under what condition*” (p. 143). An adverb clause contains a subject, a verb, and a subordinate conjunction such as *because, although, whenever, as, if, while, etc.* When an adverb clause begins the sentence, it should be followed by a comma. For example:

Although the student had studied for many hours, he was still somewhat anxious about the pharmacology test.

### 5. Use commas to set off parenthetical or nonessential expressions; that is, “a word or a phrase that is unrelated to the rest of the sentence and interrupts the general flow of the sentence” (p. 665). Test this by removing the expression; if the sentence retains its meaning, it is parenthetical. If the expression is essential to the meaning of the sentence, it should not be set off by commas. APA refers to these as nonessential or nonrestrictive clauses. Examples of these types of expressions include:

a) names of people being addressed,

b) conjunctive adverbs,

*also, besides, furthermore, however, indeed, instead, moreover, nevertheless, therefore*

c) common expressions,

*by the way, I feel, in my opinion, in the first place, of course, on the other hand*

d) and contrasting expressions.

*not that one, not there, not mine*

### 6. Commas with Places, Dates, and Titles (p. 669)

a. “When a geographical name is made up of two or more parts, use a comma after each item.”

When I was on vacation, I took the bus from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Phoenix, Arizona.

b. “When a date is made up of two or more parts, use a comma after each item except in the case of a month followed by a day.”

On Friday, May 7, 2010, the college will hold its spring graduation ceremonies.

Omit the commas if the date consists of only the month and year:

The flood in June 2008 destroyed many homes near the river.

- c. “When a name is followed by one or more titles, use a comma after the name and after each title.”

I visited with Jerry Durham, PhD, RN, FAAN, about the new building plans for the College.

A similar rule applies with some business abbreviations:

Wednesday, November 23, Pearson Education, Inc., delivered the textbooks.

## 7. Other Uses of the Comma

- a. After each part of an address consisting of two or more parts

The college’s physical address is Allen College, 1990 Heath Street, Waterloo, Iowa 50703.

Note that an extra space, not a comma, is placed between the state and the ZIP code

- b. After the salutation in a personal letter and after the closing in all letters  
c. After every third digit in a number with more than three digits, beginning at the right

Carrell, J. A., Wilson, E. E., & Forlini, G. (2004). *Writing and grammar: Communication in action*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall

## APA Rules for the Use of Commas

1. Use commas to separate the items in a series of three or more items. Include a comma before the *and* and *or* (APA, 2010, p.88).

Students were asked to bring a pencil, a calculator, and an eraser with them when they came for the medication calculation test.

2. Use commas to set off a nonessential clause in a sentence.

A nonessential (a.k.a. nonrestrictive) clause is one that “embellishes a sentence” (APA, 2010, p. 88).

According to Carrell, Wilson, and Forlini (2004), a nonrestrictive clause can be removed from the sentence without removing any information that the reader is required to have. For example, consider the sentence “The conductor, wearing a black tuxedo, led the ensemble through several difficult pieces.” The clause *wearing a black tuxedo* does not contain essential information for the reader, so, as a nonessential clause, it is set off with commas.

These authors state that an essential (a.k.a. restrictive) clause, on the other hand, cannot be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. In other words, the information included in the clause is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence. For example, in the sentence “The woman wearing the blue jacket is the lead instructor for the course.” The clause *wearing the blue jacket* is essential because it identifies which woman the writer is referring to. Because it is an essential clause, it is not set off by commas.

3. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses that are joined by a conjunction.

Carrell, Wilson, and Forlini (2004) define an independent clause as “a group of words that contains both a subject and a verb and that can stand by itself as a complete sentence” (p. 873) and a conjunction as “a



“Use a colon between a grammatically complete introductory clause (one that could stand as a sentence) and a final phrase or clause that illustrates, extends, or amplifies the preceding thought. If the clause following the colon is a complete sentence, it begins with a capital letter” (APA, 2010, p. 90).

The research study by Brown and Simons (2005) was deficient in two areas: sample size and lack of randomization.

All of the jurors agreed on the verdict: The defendant was innocent of the charges brought against him.

#### References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: Author

Carrell, J. A., Wilson, E. E., & Forlini, G. (2004). *Writing and grammar: Communication in action*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall