

A Quick and Easy Guide to Effective Comma Use

1. Commas are used to join two independent clauses (complete sentences).

Form → Independent Clause + , + Coordinating Conjunction + Independent Clause

(and)

(but)

(or)

(for)

(nor)

(so)

Examples → I attend Cornell College, and I eat at Sodexho.

Laura works at the Writing Studio, but she also gives classroom presentations.

Other Reminders → Do **not** use a comma to link independent and dependent clauses (incomplete sentences). These are linked **only** with a coordinating conjunction.

Example → I attend Cornell College and eat at Sodexho.

Note how the underlined portion of the sentence lacks a subject. That is, we do not know who or what is doing the eating. That's how we know this is a dependent clause.

2. Commas are used when introductory phrases precede an independent clause.

Introductory clauses provide context for or extra information about the independent clause. Oftentimes introductory phrases tell us something about when, where, or how the independent clause “happened.” The following are some words that might signal an introductory phrase:

When Although Because Since Even though Where While With If

Without In On As Under Before Between Whereas However

It's important to remember that this is not a comprehensive list. Introductory phrases are not always signaled by words such as these (though they often are).

Form → Introductory Clause + , + Independent Clause

Examples → When I go to the Writing Studio, the peer consultants help me.

On my way to the Commons, I frequently listen to my iPod.

A dreadful speller, Marian always uses spell check.

Trembling with excitement, the fans waited for the release of the final *Harry Potter* book.

3. **Commas are used when modifying phrases are embedded within an independent clause.**

*Modifying phrases, much like introductory phrases, provide context for and tell us something extra about the independent clause. They can often be identified using the list provided above. However, this list is not comprehensive, and the presence of one of these words in a sentence does **not** necessarily mean that a modifying phrase is present. A good test for identifying modifying phrases is to read the sentence without them. If the sentence still makes sense (is an independent clause/complete sentence), then you have found a modifying phrase.*

Form → First part of independent clause + , + modifying phrase + , + final part of independent clause

Examples → Robin, a senior, comes to the Writing Studio to get help writing cover letters.
The dancers, skilled at tango and salsa, struggled to learn the waltz.
Laura and Shawn are, without a doubt, great writers.
The performers, after the show, all attended my party.

4. **For dialogue, commas are used before initial quotation marks. A comma is used following closing quotation marks when the dialogue is a statement and the sentence continues.**

There isn't a prescribed form for dialogue because it varies in so many ways, but the following ways demonstrate how to use commas for dialogue in almost all situations.

Examples → The students said to their professor, "Please don't give us homework."
"We want to have fun this weekend," they explained.
"Can you plan a party for us instead?" they asked.
"We would love that!" they exclaimed.
The students smiled and shouted, "Hurray!" when their professor consented.
Jennifer declared, "I love coffee," as she turned on the coffee maker.

5. **Commas are used in a list or series.**

Though you aren't technically required to put a comma before the final item in the list, it is consistent with most styles and standards to do so. Also, meanings can sometimes be obscured when a comma is not placed before the final item.

Examples → We would like paper, pens, and erasers.
You can schedule an appointment in the Writing Studio by calling ahead of time, stopping by ahead of time, or just stopping by.

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