



## COMMAS

Commas may easily be the most confusing piece of punctuation for writers. It seems there are too many rules and too many exceptions for commas to make sense, and the idea of using pauses to determine where commas belong is too inaccurate. The information below, however, shows the most typical uses for the comma. If you can learn these few uses, most of your comma confusion will end.

### Connecting Two Complete Sentences

Sometimes it is more effective to combine two sentences, especially if you are trying to express some kind of relationship between them. In order to combine them correctly, however, you need to use a connecting word called a conjunction. A conjunction follows a comma and comes before the start of what was the second sentence. The following sentences should be joined with a comma:

Craig unknowingly lost his wallet. He didn't have money to pay for the meal.

**Wrong:** Craig unknowingly lost his wallet, he didn't have money to pay for the meal.

**Right:** Craig unknowingly lost his wallet, so he didn't have money to pay for the meal.

The first example is incorrect because two complete independent sentences cannot be connected with only a comma. This error is called a **comma splice**.

If you join two complete sentences together with a connecting word, a comma must come before it. Connecting words are commonly called **coordinating conjunctions**. When used with a comma, a conjunction helps to connect two independent clauses together to form one sentence.

### Seven Conjunctions

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

There is another side of this rule. That is, if you do **not** have two complete sentences, one to the left of the conjunction and one to the right, you do not use a comma to connect them.

## Following a Statement That Cannot Stand Alone

A common way to begin a sentence is with a statement that cannot stand by itself. This kind of statement is called a **dependent clause** because it relies on a complete sentence to follow in order for it to make sense.

### Words Commonly Beginning Dependent Clauses

after	since
although	though
before	unless
because	until
during	when
even	where
if	while

The following statement cannot stand alone as a sentence: When I finish college.

Examples:

**Wrong:** When I finish college I plan to go to law school.

**Right:** When I finish college, I plan to go to law school.

The first statement cannot stand by itself. When it appears in this form, it is called a **sentence fragment** because it is only part of a sentence. When you read it, it does not make sense because the thought is not complete.

The first example fixes this problem by completing the thought and the sentence, but it is not correctly punctuated. If the dependent portion comes at the beginning of the sentence, a comma must come between the part that cannot stand alone and the sentence that completes the thought. The second example is correct.

You could also reword the sentence so the dependent part comes at the end, and then it would not require a comma, like so:

I plan to go to law school when I finish college.

## Separating Items in a List

If you have a list of items, use commas to separate them. These commas eliminate the need to put “and” between each item.

Examples:

At the store I bought eggs, milk, bread, ham, macaroni and cheese.

At the store I bought eggs, milk, bread, ham, macaroni, and cheese.

Both of these examples can be considered correct depending on your discipline. Fields that use Associated Press (AP) style, such as journalism, prefer the first example. The second example is still preferred by many, though, because it eliminates confusion.

Notice that if you do not read the first example carefully, you might read “macaroni and cheese” as one food product and not separate items. In the second example, the comma makes it obvious these are separate items. So, unless you are writing for a newspaper, you should always use a comma before the word “and.”

## Separating Parts of Dates or Addresses

If you write our dates or addresses, you need to use commas to separate the parts from each other and the rest of the sentence.

Examples:

I graduated from college on Friday, December 17, 2004, at four o'clock. SMSU is located at 901 S. National, Springfield, Missouri 65804, near the square. I moved to Springfield in January 2000.

With dates, you **do** not need commas when listing the month and year only or when using the international style (17 Dec 2004). With addresses, you do not use a comma between the state and zip code.

## Around Nonessential Information

When you use a phrase to provide additional information that is not necessary for the sentence to make sense, place commas on both sides of the phrase. The commas indicate that the phrase provides nonessential information.

Examples:

**Wrong:** Freshmen, who score a four on the essay, are exempt from ENG 110.

**Right:** Jane Smith, director of student services, will prepare the report.

The first sentence is incorrect because if the phrase is deleted, the meaning of the sentence will change (all freshmen are exempt from ENG 100). To correct this sentence, remove both commas. The second sentence is correct because if Jane's title is deleted, the sentence still means the same thing.