

USING COMMAS

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so yet.

The game was over, but the crowd refused to leave.
I wanted to go to college, so I earned good grades in high school.

2. Use commas after introductory (dependent) clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause:

Common starter words for clauses:

after	as	if	when
although	because	since	while

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.
After the storm was over, trees blocked the streets.

Common starter words for phrases:

verb + ing	Having finished the test, he left the room Walking to work, I noticed the flowers blooming.
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to + verb	To get a seat, you'd better come early. To my surprise, I won the award.
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Long prepositional phrases:

After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.
In the last moment of the game, we scored the winning goal.

one word before the main clause:

Now, it seems they told the truth.
First, you need eggs.

3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of the sentence to set off phrases, clauses, and words that are *not essential* to the meaning of the sentence. (One comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.)

Clues:

Can you leave out the clause, phrase, or word and still have the sentence make sense?

Does the non-essential clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?

Can you move the non-essential element around in the sentence?

Yesterday, the last day of summer, I learned the truth.
The monkeys, without my consent, ate all the bananas.

4. Does the clause begin with “that”? “That” clauses after nouns are almost always essential. “That” clauses which follow a verb expressing mental action are always essential. No comma is needed for essential clauses.

After nouns

The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.
Apples that are green are usually called Granny Smith apples.

After verbs

She believes that she will earn an A.
He dreams that he can fly.

5. Use commas to separate two or more words, phrases, and clauses written in a series.

She couldn't choose between John, Jim, or Joe.
The candidate promised to lower taxes, solve the energy shortage, and end racism.

6. use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

Clues:

Can you write the adjectives in reverse order? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.)

a greedy, stubborn child a stubborn, greedy child

Can you add an AND between the adjectives? (If your answer is yes, add a comma.)

a happy, easy smile a happy and easy smile

7. Use commas near the end of the sentence to separate sharply contrasting coordinate elements in the sentence or to indicate a distinct voice pause.

He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
You're one of the senator's right-hand men, aren't you?

