

# 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<br>Walking to work, I noticed the flowers blooming. |
|------------|--|

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| to + verb | To get a seat, you'd better come early.<br>To my surprise, I won the award. |
|-----------|---|

## 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?

**8. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence which refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. (These phrases are free modifiers which can be placed at the beginning, middle, or the end of the sentence without causing confusion.)**

Nancy hurried away, crying loudly in the process.  
The lobsters scurried across the floor, leaving streaks of butter sauce across the carpet.

**9. Use commas to set off geographical names, items in dates, addresses, and titles in names.**

|                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Birmingham, Alabama | July 22, 1959     |
| Washington, D. C.   | Diane B. Lake, MD |

**10. use commas to set off direct quotations and after the first part of a quotation in a sentence.**

John said, "I'll see you tomorrow."  
"I was able," she answered, "to complete the assignment."

**11. Use commas anywhere in the sentence to prevent possible confusion or misreading.**

To John, Harrison has been sort of an idol.

## COMMA ABUSE

Commas in the wrong places can chop ideas into wrong pieces or confuse the reader with unnecessary pauses.

**Don't use a comma between a subject and its verb.**

WRONG: The eighteen-year-old in California, is now considered an adult.

**Don't put a comma between two verbs.**

WRONG: We laid out our music and snacks, and began to study.

**Don't put a comma before a dependant (subordinate) clause when it comes after the main clause (except for extreme contrast.)**

WRONG: She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken.