

The Comma

When we see a comma, we take a short pause in our reading. There are multiple reasons for using a comma:

Before a Coordinating Conjunction

When we join two independent clauses together (an independent clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a complete sentence), a comma precedes the conjunction. The conjunctions are commonly referred to as the FANBOYS:

For
And
Nor
But
Or
Yet
So

The comma signifies that one independent clause has come to an end and that another one is about to begin.

I have no head for figures, so I hire an accountant to do my taxes.

I went to the beach, and I swam all day.

However, we can omit the comma before coordinating conjunctions if the two clauses are short or have the same subjects:

The telephone rang and he got up to answer it.

He failed his exams but didn't care.

The Appositive

An appositive is a word or a group of words that function as a noun. An appositive explains more about the noun or pronoun that it follows:

Julie, my sister, is a dentist.

my sister – the appositive – explains who Julie is.

Mr. Smith, our math teacher, will be retiring at the end of the semester.

our math teacher – the appositive – explains who Mr. Smith is.

A Series

Use a comma to separate items in a series (a list):

Sally, John, Debbie, and Peter are going to the beach on Saturday.

The most common ingredients for baking a cake include eggs, flour, butter, and sugar.

Likewise, we use a comma between coordinate adjectives (coordinate adjectives can be connected with *and*):

The pink, orange sunrise dazzled the sky. (The pink *and* orange sunrise dazzled the sky.)

Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives:

Three small black bugs crept towards us. (Not three small *and* black bugs crept toward us.)

The Dependent Clause

Use a comma after a dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence. The comma sets off the independent (main) clause.

When I feel tired, I try to go to bed early.

If I have a headache, I usually take aspirin to feel better.

Dates and Addresses

Use a comma to set off the second and all following items when writing complete dates and addresses:

My last trip to England was on November 3, 2010.

My mother lives at 47 Smith Street, Kaneohe, Hawaii.

The art exhibition runs from April 1, 2014, to May 1, 2014.

We do not use a comma for incomplete dates:

In August 2000 I traveled to Israel.

In 2010 I graduated college.

Quotations

A quotation (direct speech) is set off by commas from the rest of the sentence:

Sally said, "What time is the movie?"

"These trucks are not for sale," said the car salesman.

Introductory Words

Use a comma after an introductory word or phrase:

Yes, I'll drive you to school tomorrow.

No, I cannot stay out late tonight.

If a person's name falls in the middle of a sentence, the name must be set off by commas:

Please, Carly, take me with you.

If you, David, want to go to the movies, then you must let me know by 6:00 p.m.

Note: a comma may be omitted if meaning remains clear.

In no time we were at 30,000 feet.

Parenthetical Expressions

A parenthetical expression is an expression that interrupts the thought of the sentence. When speaking, one would pause before and after the parenthetical expression:

Claire, you know, is going to college in the spring.

The concert, to be honest with you, was a waste of time.

Micah, I bet, will win the tennis tournament.

Transitional Expressions

Transitional expressions include words such as *of course*, *indeed*, *moreover*, and *no doubt*.

Mrs. Jones, of course, is proud of her daughter.

The exam was, indeed, difficult.

Your blue jacket, for instance, is warm enough for this evening.