

GUIDE TO COMMA USAGE

Commas separate phrases and items within a sentence. They also clarify sentences and allow writers to effectively convey their messages. Despite the importance of commas, writers often misuse this common punctuation mark.

This guide covers 7 Comma Rules that you should know in order to properly use commas in your writing.

Commas clarify your sentences. For example, “the panda eats shoots and leaves” (indicating that the panda eats plants) and “the panda eats, shoots, and leaves” (indicating that the panda eats first, then fires a weapon, then lastly flees the scene) have very different meanings!

7 COMMA RULES

- 1. Separate Items in a Series** – use commas to separate items in a list of three or more items.
 - Noah walked down the hill, through the woods, and across the road to buy a soda.
- 2. Join Independent Clauses** – use a comma and a conjunction to join two independent clauses together.
 - Kathryn needed a study break, so she went for a walk to clear her head.
- 3. Set Off Introductory Elements** – an introductory element is an adverbial phrase that “sets the scene” for a complete sentence. Use a comma after an introductory element.
 - Walking into the library, Jaelyn remembered she left her textbook at home.
- 4. Set Off Parenthetical Elements** – a parenthetical element is a phrase that adds detail to a sentence but can be removed without making the sentence a fragment. Use a comma before and after a parenthetical element.
 - Danielle took her favorite book, The Horse and His Boy, to the park.
- 5. Separate Coordinate Adjectives** – coordinate adjectives are two adjectives used to modify the same noun. Use a comma in between coordinate adjectives.
 - The students trembled as their strict, overbearing professor passed out the exams.
- 6. Set Off Direct Quotes** – use a comma before introducing a quote.
 - Amy said, “I made pumpkin scones!”
- 7. Set Off Contrasts** – use a comma to set off phrases that express contrast. **NOTE:** Be careful not to create a “comma splice” by joining two independent clauses without a conjunction.
 - Heather was very excited, yet tired.

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