

Comma Usage
A “Grammar Help Handout” by Abbie Potter Henry

In the broadest sense, commas are used in three ways: **to introduce, to connect, and to separate.** Within these three categories of usage, there are several variations which will be shown below.

Remember: “I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand.” –Chinese Proverb

Commas to introduce

When commas are used to introduce, they come after a word, a phrase, or a dependent clause that is introducing an independent clause.

Commas used after introductory words

After a word or words used to address an individual or group

John, I want you to come here now!

Dear John,

It’s over.

Friends and countrymen, I promise everything for nothing.

Practice writing your own sentences.

After Transitional words and phrases (also known as adverbial conjunctions)

I will be a great senator. **Furthermore**, I will never lie to you.

However, I may change my mind.

Then, you will know how fickle I really am.

As a matter of fact, you will know not to trust me anymore.

Practice writing your own sentences.

Commas used after phrases

After a verbal phrase used to introduce a independent clause

Eating forty-five hotdogs in twenty minutes, John finally broke the world record.

Sickened by John’s gluttony, Sarah ended the relationship.

To win her back, John vowed to become a vegetarian.

Practice writing your own sentences.

After a prepositional phrase of five or more words

For fifteen years and six months, John was able to keep his promise.

By the middle of that fifteenth year, John was beginning to waver.

Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go.

Practice writing your own sentences.

After shorter prepositional phrase to prevent confusion

With her cat, Sarah always slept more soundly.

From the cat, John received nothing but a bad attitude.

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Commas used after Dependent clauses* that introduce independent clauses

After John broke his promise, Sarah left him for good.

When he realized the relationship was over, John gained one hundred pounds.

Because she still cared about him, Sarah paid for a stomach staple and a gym membership.

Note: Do **not** use commas to introduce dependent clauses

Sara left him for good **after John broke his promise.**

John gained one hundred pounds **when he realized the relationship was over.**

Sarah paid for a stomach staple and a gym membership **because she still cared about him.**

Practice writing your own sentences.

*A list of words (Subordinating Conjunctions) that usually signal the beginning of a Dependent Clause can be found on page 4.

Commas to help connect independent clauses

A comma by itself cannot connect two independent clauses, and if you try, you will create a comma splice error. However, a comma is used as part of a team in two ways to help connect independent clauses.

Commas with coordinating conjunctions*

John ate too much, **and** Sarah got mad.

He wouldn't change his ways, **so** Sarah left.

He begged her to come back, **but** she said no.

She continued to say no, **yet** he would not quit.

He cried and cried, **for** he loved her deeply.

He had to have her back, **or** he would eat himself to death.

She would not answer his calls, **nor** would she reply to his emails.

Note: You do **not** need a comma when connecting two smaller parts of sentences such as phrases or verbs.

John walked to the lake **and** around the park.

Sarah had a very lonely week **but** held to her decision.

Practice writing your own sentences

*A list of these words can be found on page 4.

Commas with a semi colon and a transitional word/phrase* (adverbial conjunctions)

John ate too much; **as a result,** he was obese.

Sarah tried to put him on a diet; **in addition,** she bought him a gym membership.

John promised to lose weight; **however,** he kept getting heavier.

John would not change his ways; **therefore,** he did not lose weight.

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Commas to separate

A comma is used to separate like items from each other. Commas are also be used to separate restrictive/non-essential phrases, clauses, or appositives from the clause they are interrupting.

Commas used to separate like items

Commas used to separate Items in a series

I can **walk, talk, and eat** at the same time.

I **walked to the store, ran to the bank, and skipped to the park.**

I walked **from my car, around the block, and up the stairs.**

John, Sarah, and Molly went to the store.

Practice writing your own sentences.

Commas used to separate adjectives that are describing the same noun or pronoun

The **sad, lonely** man walked to the store.

The **ragged, old** jacket was too decrepit for Goodwill.

Practice writing your own sentences:

Commas used to separate interrupters

John, **however**, could not stand the thoughts of the jacket being thrown away.

Sarah, **on the other hand**, was glad to see it go.

Sarah, **not John**, ended the relationship.

Practice writing your own sentences:

Commas used to separate restrictive/non-essential elements

When an appositive, phrase, or adjective clause is **not essential to identify** the noun or pronoun that it is modifying or renaming, it is separated with commas from the rest of the clause. (Sometimes this happens in the middle of a clause, and sometimes it happens at the end of a clause.)

Commas used to separate nonessential appositives

My neighbor, **a fast food junkie**, had a heart attack yesterday.

My dog, **Sassy**, is a pit bull mix.

The band, **a group of sleep deprived college students**, played for three hours before resting.

Practice writing your own sentences:

Commas used to separate nonessential adjective phrases

Sarah, **excited by the A on her latest essay**, rushed home to show her mom.

John and Molly, **walking side by side**, kept bumping shoulders.

John, **to make it to the church on time**, ran a red light and got a ticket.

Practice writing your own sentences:

Commas used to separate nonessential adjective clauses

Mary, **who always eats too much**, got to the party early.

My dog, **who loves me unconditionally**, always meets me at the door.

I love my dog, **who loves me just as much**.

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Practice writing your own sentences:

When proofreading your own writing, make sure every comma is performing one of the following:

- Introducing an independent clause
- Helping to connect two independent clauses
- Separating like items or interrupters

Coordinating Conjunctions

For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

Transitional Words and Phrases

Also

As a result

At the same time

Certainly

Consequently

Finally

For example

Furthermore

Hence

However

In addition

Indeed

Instead

Likewise

Meanwhile

Moreover

Nevertheless

Next

Nonetheless

Now

On the other hand

Similarly

Still

Then

Thereafter

Therefore

Thus

Undoubtedly

Common Subordinating Conjunctions

After

Although

As

As far as

As if

As soon as

As though

Before

Because

Even if

Even though

In case

If

In order that

In that

Now that

Once

Provided that

Since

Though

Unless

Until

When

Whenever

Whether

Where

Wherever

While