

Commas

Students often sprinkle commas through their papers as if they were shaking salt out of a salt shaker. Rule of thumb: Don't use a comma unless you know a rule for it. Commas are important because without them, a reader would often have to reread a sentence to find out what the writer meant.

While the use of commas also requires sensitivity to the rhythm and pace of a line and to the sense of what is being said, even master chefs started their careers by first following a recipe. So MASTER THESE SIX RULES, and your writing will be easier to read:



1. Put a comma before *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so* (FANBOYS) when they connect two complete sentences (independent clauses).

- We lost our oars, and that was the end of our boating.
- We may leave Friday, or we may wait until Monday.

🔗 Be sure such words do connect two complete sentences and not two words or two phrases. The following sentence is merely one sentence with two verbs.

- I wanted to go *but* couldn't get my car started.

2. Put a comma between items in a series.

- Hurrah for the red, white, and blue.
- She put down the phone, picked up her keys, and left.

Some words "go together" and don't need a comma between them even though they do make up a series.

- The dear little old lady.

🔗 To tell whether a comma is needed between two words in a series, see whether and could be substituted naturally between them. It would sound all right to say *red and white and blue*; therefore, commas are used. But it would not sound right to say *dear and little and old lady*; therefore, no commas are used.

🔗 Sometimes, journalists will omit the comma before the *and* connecting the last two members of a series, but it should always be used in college writing.

🔗 Consider the following letter a reader wrote to Time in response to that magazine's policy of omitting the final comma before the conjunction:

"This omission reminds me of my fifth-grade teacher's lesson on the subject. A father's will

stipulated that his estate be shared equally by his three sons: 'Tom, Dick and Harry.' Tom took the matter to the grammar court and won the case: he inherited half the estate, and Dick and Harry split the other half."

📌 If an address or date is used in a sentence, treat it as a series, putting a comma after every item, including the last.

- He was born on August 20, 1965, in Boca Raton, Florida, and grew up there.
- She lived in Austin, Texas, for three years.

📌 When only the month and year are used in a date, however, the commas are omitted.

- In June 1980 he moved to Omaha, Nebraska.

3. Put a comma after an introductory expression that doesn't flow smoothly into the sentence or before an afterthought that is tacked on. It may be a word, a group of words, or a dependent clause.

- Yes, I'd like to go swimming.
- Below, the submarine checked the water for mines.
- Moreover, the umpire agreed with me.
- Keeping a steady gait, the old horse won the race.
- When I entered, the courtroom was packed.
- It's too late to register now, isn't it?

📌 Notice how in the second and fifth sentences above, the comma is necessary. Otherwise the reader would read *Below the submarine...* and *When I entered the courtroom...* before realizing that this was not what the writer meant. A comma prevents misreading.

4. Put commas around the name of a person spoken to.

- I think, Dawn, that you are absolutely right.
- Ephraim, how about a game of tennis?
- I've finished waxing your surfboard, Brice.

5. Put commas around an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence. Such an expression could be *however, moreover, therefore, finally, of course, by the way, on the other hand, I think*.

- We knew, of course, that we were going to be late.
- We didn't expect, therefore, to get good seats.
- She should, I think, take a vacation.

📌 But remember that when an interrupting word comes between two complete sentences, the word always has a semicolon before it and, usually, a comma after it.

- I overslept; however, I still arrived at the interview on time.
- I didn't study in high school; now I do.

- ✎ Thus a transitional word *however* or *therefore* may be used in three ways:
- as an interrupter (commas round it)
 - as a word that flows into the sentence (no commas needed)
 - as a connecting word between two independent clauses (semicolon before it and often a comma after it)

6. Put commas around nonessential material.

- ✎ The trick in deciding whether material is essential is to ask, "Interesting, but is it necessary?" In the following sentence
- Dorothea Fox, who is running for mayor, will speak tonight.
- ✎ The clause "*who is running for mayor*" is interesting but not necessary—not essential—to the main idea of the sentence. Without it we still know exactly what the sentence is about: Dorothea Fox will speak tonight. But in the following sentence
- The woman who is running for mayor will speak tonight.
- ✎ The clause *who is running for mayor* is necessary—essential—to the main idea of the sentence. Without it the sentence would read: The woman will speak tonight. We would have no idea which woman. Therefore, the commas are not used around it.

Exercise 1

Punctuate these sentences according to the first three comma rules.

1. Because migrants have conquered wildernesses developed natural resources and established nations, migration has been an important force throughout history.
2. Unlike nomads migrants usually settle permanently and adopt the customs of their new home.
3. Not many early migrating people braved the oceans but the ancient Polynesians crossed the sea to find a new home.
4. Among the many migrants to the United States the Scandinavians settled in Minnesota Wisconsin and North Dakota.
5. Wherever they settled they stayed because they had come to make their homes.
6. Some settlers in the Midwest decided to migrate to the West Coast and made the trip by covered wagon.
7. When the famous overland mail service was started in 1858 travelers spent nearly three weeks in cramped stagecoaches going from Missouri to California.
8. They had little sleep and only poor food was available at the stops where the horses were changed along the way.
9. When in 1860 the pony express began to carry letters in saddlebags on fast ponies the migrants lost one way of travel.
10. Today in the United States some people migrate to find a better climate but most people migrate to seek better jobs.

Exercise 2

Punctuate these sentences according to rules 4, 5, and 6.

1. Whales most people assume are nonvocal mammals.
2. But one whale the humpback emits a "song."
3. By "song" is meant a regular sequence of repeated sounds that are organized into patterns like the calls made by birds.
4. Unlike birdsongs which are high-pitched and last only a few seconds humpback songs vary in pitch and last between six and thirty minutes.
5. The amazing thing about the humpback whale's song however is that it is constantly changing.
6. All the whales in one locality sing the same song in any one year. The following year however their song will be slightly different.
7. The whales compose it seems as they go along, and they incorporate new elements into their song of the previous year.
8. All the whales in Bermuda waters for example will sing the same song in any one year while all the whales in Hawaii waters will be singing a slightly different tune.
9. The following year however each group will alter its song slightly.
10. This astonishing fact moreover sets these whales apart from all other mammals because no other mammal except man has the ability to vary its song.

Answers

Exercise 1

1. wildernesses, developed natural resources, and established nations,
2. nomads,
3. oceans,
4. States, the Scandinavians settled in Minnesota, Wisconsin,
5. Wherever they settled,
6. ---
7. 1858,
8. sleep,
9. ponies,
10. climate,

Exercise 2

1. Whales, most people assume,
2. Whale, the humpback,
3. -----
4. birdsongs, which . . . seconds,
5. song, however,
6. following year, however,
7. compose, it seems,
8. waters, for example,
9. year, however,
10. fact, moreover,