

Comma

Use a pair of commas to surround a non-defining clause (one which adds descriptive information but which can be removed without losing the meaning of the sentence) – note that only ‘which’ or ‘who’ can be used in this type of clause, not ‘that’.

✓ The library, which was built in the seventeenth century, needs to be repaired.

✓ The man, who climbed the tower without a safety harness, died of old age.

Do not use commas to surround a defining clause (which cannot be removed without losing the meaning of the sentence) – note that ‘which’ or ‘who’ can be replaced by ‘that’ in this type of clause.

✓ The library which was built in the seventeenth century needs to be repaired [but the library which was built in the eighteenth century does not].

✓ The man that climbed the tower without a safety harness died of old age [but the other man died in a different way].

✓ He asked his friend Sam to be his second [not any of his other friends].

Use commas to surround a non-defining word or phrase (which adds information but could be omitted without changing the sense of the sentence), and follow the non-defining word/phrase with a single comma if it is at the start of the sentence.

✓ Shakespeare, the prolific playwright, might not have existed.

✓ A prolific playwright, Shakespeare might not have existed.

✓ He asked Sam, his friend, to be his second [not the Sam who is his barber].

✓ The prime minister, David Cameron, is an alumnus of Brasenose.

Do not use a comma where defining information is used at the start of a sentence.

✓ The prolific playwright Shakespeare might not have existed.

✗ The prolific playwright, Shakespeare might not have existed.

✓ His friend Sam was his second.

✗ His friend, Sam was his second.

Defining vs non-defining information

Do not use a comma to join two main clauses, or those linked by adverbs or adverbial phrases (eg ‘nevertheless’, ‘therefore’, ‘however’). This is sometimes referred to as ‘comma splicing’. Either use a semicolon or add a coordinating conjunction (eg ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’).

✓ Shakespeare was popular, and his plays were all profitable.

✓ Shakespeare was popular; his plays were all profitable.

✗ Shakespeare was popular, his plays were all profitable.

Use a comma after an introductory adverb, adverbial phrase or subordinate clause; or use a pair of commas surrounding it if it is in the middle of a sentence.

✓ However, it was too late for that.

✓ It was, however, too late for that.

✓ With his possessions in a bundle, Dick Whittington walked to London.

✓ Dick Whittington, with his possessions in a bundle, walked to London.

Do not use a comma after a time-based adverbial phrase.

✓ After playing tennis all day she was tired.

✓ Whenever she went to the cinema she ate popcorn.

✓ In 2010 the most popular game among children was hopscotch.

Use a comma between multiple qualitative adjectives (those which can be used in the comparative/superlative or modified with ‘very’, ‘quite’ etc).

✓ He was a big, fat, sweaty man with soft, wet hands.

VALENCIA COLLEGE

West Campus Writing Center

(407) 582 – 5454

www.valenciacollege.edu/westwritingcenter

Original copy can be found at www.ox.ac.uk

Do not use a comma between multiple classifying adjectives: absolutes which either are or are not, such as 'unique', 'English', 'black' etc (although note that stylistically these can be modified).

✔ It was an edible German mushroom.

✔ The eighteenth-century sandstone tower is lit up at night.

Do not use a comma between classifying and qualitative adjectives.

✔ It was a large German mushroom with hard black edges.

✔ It was a large, squishy German mushroom with hard, frilly black edges.

Use a comma between items in a list.

✔ I ate fish, bread, ice cream and spaghetti.

✔ I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

Note that there is no comma between the penultimate item in a list and 'and'/'or', unless required to prevent ambiguity – this is sometimes referred to as the 'Oxford comma'. However, always insert a comma in this position if it would help prevent confusion.

✘ He took French, Spanish, and Maths A-levels.

✔ I ate fish and chips, bread and jam, and ice cream.

✔ We studied George III, William and Mary, and Henry VIII.

✘ She left her money to her parents, Mother Theresa and the pope.

Colon and semicolon

Use a colon to introduce a subclause which follows logically from the text before it, is not a new concept and depends logically on the preceding main clause.

✔ When I was young, I went on two holidays: to the Lake District and to Cornwall.

✔ A new drink was introduced to Britain: tea.

Do not use a colon if the two parts of the sentence are not logically connected.

✘ I used to be slim: I will try to lose weight.

✔ I would like to be slim: I will try to lose weight.

✘ We were in trouble this time: we'd never been in trouble before.

✔ We were in trouble this time: the lid had come right off.

✔ There are two parts to this sentence: the first part, which precedes the colon, and the second part, which doesn't.

Use a semicolon to link two related parts of a sentence, neither of which depends logically on the other and each of which could stand alone as a grammatically complete sentence.

✔ The best job is the one you enjoy; the worst job is the one you hate.

✔ It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known.

Use semicolons in place of commas in a complicated list or sentence if it will improve clarity, particularly if list items already include commas.

✔ We plan to review the quality of the research of the department, including its participation in interdepartmental, interdivisional and interdisciplinary activities; its research profile and strategy; and future challenges and opportunities.

✔ I visited the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and the Pencil Museum, Keswick.

VALENCIA COLLEGE

West Campus Writing Center

(407) 582 – 5454

www.valenciacollege.edu/westwritingcenter

Original copy can be found at www.ox.ac.uk