



# The Writing Centre's Guide to Commas

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**WRITING TUTORS**

# The Beginning



Do you feel comfortable using commas in your writing?

If not, you're not alone. Just google the term "comma use" and you will come up with more than 3 million hits (496, 000 if just looking at Canadian webpages)!

Some have been taught to use a comma whenever it's necessary to pause, as when speaking; however, because we pause when speaking to breathe or swallow, it's not reliable to use this rule because we are reading, not speaking.

One general rule to remember is to ***use a comma to guide the reader through the sentence and prevent misreading***

Let's see if we can make using commas simple.

# Rule 1: The Separation Comma

- Use a comma to **separate elements in a series or list** of three or more things.
- You may have learned that the last comma in a list of items is not necessary.
- Sometimes, however, the last two items in your series will fuse into one if you don't use this separation comma. Using a comma between **all the items in a series, including the last two**, avoids problems.
- This last comma is called a "serial comma" or "Oxford Comma".

# Rule 1: The Separation Comma

- My favourite uses of the Internet are sending emails, surfing the Web, and using chat rooms.
- Required subjects are Math, English, Bookkeeping, and Business Law.
- Walk up the hill, turn left, go two blocks, and you'll be there!

**These are Oxford commas**



# Rule 2: The “FANBOYS” Comma

- Using a comma with a coordinating conjunction to separate two independent clauses.

What are coordinating conjunctions?

- When using these, remember to place the comma before the coordinating conjunction.

,For

,And

,Nor

,But

,Or

,Yet

,So

# Rule 2: The “FANBOYS” Comma

I'm not speaking to her, so you'll have to tell her.

Our team is very good, but their team is better.

I can't make it to class, yet I feel I should go.

The public seems eager for some kind of gun control legislation, but the government is obviously too timid to enact any truly effective means.



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The public seems eager for some kind of gun control legislation, **but** the government is obviously too timid to enact any truly effective means.

Here you can see the comma and coordinating conjunction.



# Rule 3: The Introductory Comma

## Use a comma to set off introductory elements

- This happens after a word or group of words that comes before an independent clause.



## For Example

Anxious about the upcoming winter, settlers began to bicker among themselves about supplies.

In the year 1644, nearly half the settlers died of starvation.

Charlie, you aren't paying attention!

Until he got his promotion, he was quite a nice person.



# Rule 4: The Coordinating Comma

Use a comma to separate **coordinate adjectives**.

- Coaches grew tired of running practices in the draft, dreary gym.
- That distinguished, good looking professor is a real hard worker.
- The airy, inexpensive apartment is in a great part of town.

**Do not** insert a comma when the first adjective describes the combination of the next adjective or noun

- That *beautiful sports* car has a built-in GPS device.

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Notice the  
commas

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- That *beautiful sports* car has a built-in GPS device.

Here there is  
no comma

# Rule 4: The Coordinating Comma

Use a comma to separate **coordinate adjectives**.

HINT:

If you can put either a “but” or an “and” between the adjectives, you should put a comma between them.

For example:

should be written “an expensive and modern house”



“an expensive, modern house”



# Rule 5: The Contrary Comma

- Use a comma to set off elements that express a **contrast** or a **turn** in the sentence.
- Try to develop an awareness of other words that trigger contrary commas, words like **instead**, **rather**, and **although**.

Examples:

- The house was cute, but too expensive for the newlyweds.
- They were looking for something practical, not luxurious.
- No one paid any attention to me, not even to get me a glass of water.
- Art is not difficult because it wishes to be, rather because it wishes to be art.
- The teacher facilitates learning and collaborates with the learners, instead of dispensing information and testing students on it.

# Rule 6: The Formal Title Comma

- Use a comma to set off **states and countries, years (in FULL date), titles, etc.**

Examples:

- The conference is in Chicago, Illinois.
- Their wedding was set for August 5, 2005.
- Tashanda Klondike, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, submitted the final report.

# Rule 7: The Quoted Language Comma

- Use a comma to set off quoted language.

Examples:

- Frost's poem begins with the lines, "Some say the world will end in fire, some say ice."
- "We can't see into the future," said the president, "but we have to prepare for it nonetheless."



# Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

- Use a comma to set off **parenthetical elements**.
- This is the most difficult comma rule to apply.
- This is “added information” or something that can be removed from the sentence without changing the essential meaning of the sentence



Deciding what is “added information” and what is essential is sometimes very difficult.

# Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

Examples:

## **Appositive Phrase:**

- Can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence or making it ambiguous

*Robert Frost, perhaps America's most beloved poet, died when he was 88 years old.*

## **Absolute Phrase:**

- Is treated as a parenthetical element

*Frankly, it doesn't matter.*



# Rule 8: The Parenthetical Comma

Examples:

## **Addressed person's (or people) name**

- Is always parenthetical

*I am warning you, good citizens of Toronto, this vote is crucial for the future of our city.*

## **Interjection**

- Is treated as a parenthetical element

*Excuse me, but there are, of course, many points of view that we must consider before voting.*

Let's Review the different rules:

1. The Separation Comma
2. The "FANBOYS" Comma
3. The Introductory Comma
4. The Coordinating Comma
5. The Contrary Comma
6. The Formal Title Comma
7. The Quoted Language Comma
8. The Parenthetical Comma

You're finished!

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