

## Comma Rules

Commas are used to separate the elements of sentences. They give the reader clues in how to read sentences. When used appropriately, commas help provide clarity to the meaning of sentences.

**Rule 1:** Use a comma to separate two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). The main clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

**Examples:** I wanted to go. I didn't have enough money.

I wanted to go, **but** I didn't have enough money.

I was hired for the job, **and** I start work Monday.

You should pay your bills when they are due, **or** you will have to pay an interest charge.

**Rule 2:** Use a comma after introductory elements such as words and phrases.

**Examples:** **Hesitantly**, she handed Mr. Bah her school ID card.

**Before noon**, Michael only drinks coffee.

**Above all**, consider the consequences before making a decision.

**Rule 3:** When a sentence with two clauses begins with a word such as *when, since, while, as, because, even though*, etc., a comma is needed after the first clause.

**Examples:** He was greeted with thunderous applause **when he arose to give his speech**.

**When he arose to give his speech**, he was greeted with thunderous applause.

**As long as you do good work**, you should get a decent grade.

**Even though she likes cake and ice cream**, she skipped dessert.

**Rule 4:** Use commas to set off nonessential elements in a sentence. Nonessential elements consist of material that adds details to the sentence but is not necessary to convey the main idea.

**Example:** Jaws, **which is about killer sharks**, was written by Peter Benchley.

If the nonessential elements between the commas are omitted, the sentence would read:  
Jaws was written by Peter Benchley. The main idea of the original sentence still stands.

**Rule 5:** Do NOT use commas to set off essential elements because they are crucial to the meaning of the sentence.

**Examples:** All students who come to the Writing Center receive help with their papers. (correct)

All students, who come to the Writing Center, receive help with their papers. (incorrect)

The second example is incorrect because the material inside the commas is essential to the meaning of the sentence. If it was omitted, essential information about the students would be missing.

**Rule 6:** Use commas between a series of adjectives (describing words) that can be joined by *and*. Test this by inserting *and* where you think the comma should go. If it makes sense, replace the *and* with a comma; if it does not make sense, do NOT use a comma.

**Examples:** an expensive well-tailored suit

**Test:** an expensive *and* well-tailored suit (makes sense)

**Insert comma:** an expensive, well-tailored suit

a new tennis court

**Test:** a new *and* tennis court (does NOT make sense)

**No comma needed:** a new tennis court

**Rule 7:** Use commas to separate three or more items in a series. In some types of writing, such as in newspapers, the final (or serial) comma is dropped. For academic writing it is proper to use the serial comma.

**Examples:** Macey enjoys baseball, basketball, and golf.

Hakim walked into my office, took off his hat, and sat down.

**Rule 8:** Use commas to set off interrupters such as names used in direct address, interjections, contrasting elements, and short tag questions.

**Examples:** I am sorry, **Mr. Fernandez**, for what I have done. (direct address)

I tell you, **man**, it's time to get this done! (interjection)

Adam is a man of experience, **not a theorist**. (contrasting element)

You will try to do the work, **won't you?** (short tag question)

**Rule 9:** Use commas to set off quotations attributed to a speaker or writer such as *she replied*, *she remarked*, or *he wrote*. Please note that the comma rests inside the quotation mark of the introductory dialogue.

**Examples:** "I was able," **she replied**, "to complete the assignment in less than an hour."

**She remarked**, "I did read most of the chapter."

"I think my calculus class is going to be difficult," **he wrote** on Facebook.

**Rule 10:** Use commas to prevent confusion.

**Examples:** The band marched in, in perfect unison.

To Evan, John Lennon had been an idol.

Woman, without her, man is nothing.

Woman, without her man, is nothing.

These are the basic comma rules; for more complex comma rules, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your comma skills, please see Writing Center staff.