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# Commas

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

**Tip:** Always read what you write out loud. By listening carefully to your voice, you can often hear the pauses where commas should be, or the choppy breaks where they shouldn’t.

## separate two main clauses

Use a comma to separate two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. A main clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

**Common Coordinating Conjunctions**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| for | nor  | or  | so |
| and | but  | yet |  |

**Tip:** Use the acronym **FANBOYS** to remember the coordinating conjunctions.

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

## after introductory elements

Use a comma after introductory elements. Introductory elements can be words or phrases.

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| **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. |

## sentence with two clauses

When a sentence with two clauses begins with a word or phrase such as**when, since, while, as, because, even though,** etc., add a comma after the first clause.

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| **Examples:** | He was greeted with thunderous applause when he gave his speech. |
|  | **When he gave his speech,** he was greeted with thunderous applause. |
|  | You should get a decent grade **as long as you do good work.** |
|  | **As long as you do good work,** you should get a decent grade. |

## non-essential elements

Use commas to set non-essential elements off in a sentence. Non-essential elements add details to the sentence but are not necessary to its meaning.

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

Omit the non-essential elements between the commas, and the sentence reads: *Jaws was written by Peter Benchley.* The main idea of the original sentence still stands.

## essential elements

Because they are crucial to the meaning of the sentence, do NOT use commas to set off essential elements.

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| **Examples:** | *Incorrect*: 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.  |

Omit the text between the commas, and the sentence becomes *All students receive help with their papers.* Essential information—**which** students—is lost.

## between a series of adjectives

Use commas between a series of adjectives that can be joined by **and**.

This can be determined by inserting **and** where the comma should go. If it makes sense, the **and** is replaced with a comma. If it does not make sense, do **not** use a comma.

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| **Examples:** | An expensive well-tailored suit. **Test:** An expensive **and** well-tailored suit. (This makes sense.)**Insert comma:** An expensive**,** well-tailored suit. |
|  | A new tennis court.**Test:** A new **and** tennis court (This does **not** make sense.)**No comma needed:** A new tennis court. |

## separate three or more items

Use commas to separate three or more items in a series (called the serial, or Oxford comma). While it may not be used in other kinds of writing, the serial comma is proper for academic writing.

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| --- | --- |
| **Examples:** | Macy enjoys baseball**,** basketball**,** and golf. |
|  | Hakim walked into my office**,** took off his hat**,** and sat down. |

## set off interrupters

Use commas to set off interrupters, such as names addressed directly, interjections, contrasting elements, and short tag questions.

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| --- | --- |
| **Examples:** | *Direct address*: I am sorry**, Mr. Fernandez,** for what I have done.  |
|  | *Interjection*: I tell you**, man,** it’s time to get this done!  |
|  | *Contrasting*: Adam is a man of experience**, not a theorist**.  |
|  | *Short tag question*: You will try to do the work**, won’t you?**  |

## set off quotations

Use commas to set off quotations, such as **she replied, she remarked, he wrote.**

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| **Examples:** | “I was able**,**” **she replied,** “to complete the assignment in an hour.” |
|  | **She remarked,** “I did read most of the chapter.” |

**Note:** The comma rests inside the quotation mark of the introductory dialogue.

## prevent confusion

Use commas to prevent confusion.

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|  **Example:** | I owe my success to my two wives, John Wayne and Kirk Douglas. |
|  | I owe my success to my two wives, John Wayne, and Kirk Douglas. |

# Comma Splices and Run-on Sentences

## comma splice

**A comma splice** occurs when a comma joins two independent clauses. This can be resolved in one of three ways.

**Note:** The following examples are based on the incorrect sentence, *The painting represents life, the colors represent experiences*:

1. Use a comma with a connecting word, such as a coordinating conjunction.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | The painting represents life, **and** the colors represent experiences. |

1. Use a semicolon between the clauses.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | The painting represents life**;** the colors represent experiences. |

1. Make two separate sentences.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | The painting represents life. The colors represent experiences. |

## run-on sentences

A **run-on sentence** occurs when two or more independent clauses are not connected by punctuation or a joining word. One way to test this is to read the text aloud; the place where the sentences need to be separated can often be heard.

Run-on sentences can be resolved with the same revisions as comma splices.

**Note:** The following examples are based on the incorrect sentence, *He failed the test he will have to take it again*:

1. Use a comma with a connecting word, such as a coordinating conjunction.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | He failed the test**, so** he will have to take it again. |

1. Use a semicolon between the clauses.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | He failed the test**;** he will have to take it again. |

1. Make two separate sentences.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | He failed the test. HHe will have to take it again. |

## CHANGE AN independent clauses into a dependent clause

A somewhat more advanced solution for comma splices and run-on sentences is to change one of the independent clauses into a dependent clause.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  **Example:** | *Comma splice with two independent clauses*:Americans endeavored to put the war behind them, they began moving ahead with their lives.  |
|  | *Dependent clause*:**While Americans endeavored to put the war behind them**, they began moving ahead with their lives.  |