



# WRITING CENTER

## Commas, Comma Splices, and Run-on Sentences

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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.

**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.

**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.



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### 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.

**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. Nonessential elements add details to the sentence but are not necessary to its meaning.

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

Omit the nonessential 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.

**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.



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### 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.

**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.

**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.

**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?**



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### SET OFF QUOTATIONS

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

**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.

**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.

2. Use a semicolon between the clauses.

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

3. Make two separate sentences.

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



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## Commas, Comma Splices, and Run-on Sentences

### 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.

2. Use a semicolon between the clauses.

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

3. Make two separate sentences.

**Example:** He failed the test. He 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.