



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

COMMAS With Exercises

A general rule of thumb - when a pause is needed in a sentence for the meaning to be clear, you probably need a comma. Many people rely on this rule of thumb entirely. However, the rule of thumb method does not always work. This handout shows the rules for comma use.

The Uses of Commas

Commas are used in these 6 main ways:

- ◆ To separate introductory parts of sentences from the main sentence
- ◆ To separate items in a list
- ◆ With a coordinator (and, so, but, for, yet, or, nor) to separate two complete thoughts
- ◆ To separate words that interrupt the flow of a sentence
- ◆ To separate a direct quotation from the rest of a sentence
- ◆ To separate components of dates, numbers and addresses

The following explores these uses in more detail.

Commas Separate Introductory Parts of Sentences from the Main Sentence

A comma is used after introductory words, phrases or clauses. Another way to look at it is that commas come before the main subject of a sentence. In this way, the comma is a sign to the reader that the main subject is coming.

Words: *Unfortunately, our picnic was rained out.*

Phrases: *Laughing to himself, he drew a cartoon.*

At 6:00, the family sat down to dinner.

In conclusion, the law needs to be changed.

Clauses: *After she finished her paper, she fell into bed and slept.*

If I won the lottery, I would travel.

Because we had never met, we felt awkward at first.

Exercise 1: Commas and Introductory Material

Put commas after introductory material. Note that not every sentence needs a comma.

1. When the lecture was over everyone started packing up to go home. Most people put their books in their bags and left the room. However Maria wanted to talk to the instructor, so she went up to the front of the room. The instructor was busy sorting out his lecture notes. After he had put them in his briefcase she spoke to him. Unfortunately he was in a big hurry. He asked her to see him during his office hours the next day. Frustrated by this Maria left the room.
2. Jumping up and down the children waited for the movie to begin. Because they had heard so much about the movie they weren't surprised when it began with a cartoon.
3. During the coffee break Peter ran down to the library to renew his library books. Surprised he found the library was closed. He had forgotten that the library was on reduced summer hours. As a result of the early summer closures he had to renew his books the next day.

Commas Separate Items in Lists

Commas are used to separate items in a list of 3 or more items.

She invited Amanda, Amy, Nick and Claire to her party.

Strawberries, watermelon and apricots are my favorite fruits.

A student has to go to class, take notes, read textbooks and write exams.

The shift changes at midnight, eight in the morning and four in the afternoon.

Note: In the example lists above, a comma has not been used before the *and*. However, some people prefer to use commas before the *and*. For example:

She invited Amanda, Amy, Nick, and Claire to her party.

Although either with or without the comma is acceptable, you should use one way or the other consistently in a piece of writing.

Exercise 2: Commas in Lists

Separate the listed items in the following sentences by adding commas. Not every sentence needs commas.

1. Her favorite science fiction authors are Terry Brooks Ray Bradbury and Marian Zimmer Bradley.
2. She served her guests coffee and cake.
3. At the store, she bought milk orange juice pasta and tea.
4. The instructor showed a video explained some key concepts and led a class discussion.
5. Basketball hockey football baseball and soccer are popular spectator sports.
6. She played the piano and sang in the school choir.
7. He is taking history psychology political science and economics this term.

Commas are Used with Coordinators to Separate Two Complete Ideas

A comma is used before a coordinator which joins two independent clauses. An independent clause expresses a complete thought, like a simple sentence. The only coordinators are *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*. A good way to remember these coordinators is to remember the phrase FAN BOYS.

For: *They went to a fancy restaurant, for it was his birthday.*

And: *He ordered salmon, and she ordered pasta.*

Nor: *He didn't have soup, nor did he order anything to drink.*

But: *She wanted to have oysters, but the restaurant had run out of them.*

Or: *Would you like dessert, or would you prefer to get your bill?*

Yet: *They loved the chocolate cake, yet the pieces were too big to finish.*

So: *The service was excellent, so they left a big tip.*

Note: The comma is optional when both independent clauses are short.

Remember that commas are used only when the coordinator joins two separate subject/verb combinations. If a sentence has one subject with two verbs, you should not use a comma. For example, *She sat down and ordered a coffee.* This does not need a comma as there is only one subject. Similarly, if the sentence has two subjects but only one verb, no comma is used. For example, *The angry woman and her crying children left the store without any groceries.*

Exercise 3: Commas and Coordinators

Add commas where needed in the sentences. Note that not all sentences need commas.

1. The Alouette satellite was launched in 1962 and the Anik satellite was launched in 1972.
2. The two satellites were used for communication and were launched with American rockets.
3. The satellites were Canadian but the Americans launched them.
4. Julie Payette is a woman scientist so she is a role model for Canadian girls.
5. Girls are good at science in elementary school but often they lose interest in science in high school.
6. Girls tend to do as well as boys in science courses yet they often think it is for boys.
7. Julie Payette studied engineering and joined Canada's space program.

Commas Separate Ideas Which Interrupt the Flow of a Sentence

When information is added to a sentence and that information interrupts the flow of ideas of the sentence, commas are used to separate the interruption from the rest of the sentence. Here are some examples:

Julie Payette, for example, is an excellent role model for girls.

Marc Garneau, on the other hand, is famous because he was Canada's first astronaut.

John A. McDonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, had a drinking problem.

Douglas College is in New Westminster, B.C.'s first capital.

A salmon, its sides gleaming, struggled up the river.

Nick, who had poor grades in high school, is doing quite well in college.

Many downtown eastside residents use the Carnegie Centre, which sits at Hastings and Main.

To decide whether something is an interrupter, you should try taking those words out of the sentence. If you can take them out and the meaning of the sentence is still clear, you have an interrupter. However, if you take the words out and the meaning is no longer clear, there is no interrupter, and you don't need commas.

For example:

Sir Wilfred Laurier, who was a past prime minister of Canada, is pictured on our five dollar bill.

Notice that if you take out *who was a past prime minister of Canada*, the meaning of the main sentence is still clear. *Who was a past prime minister of Canada* is extra information, not essential to understanding the main sentence. Even without it, we know whose picture is on the five dollar bill. However, look at this sentence:

If you want to make a complaint, you need to talk to the man who is sitting at the desk by the window.

Notice if you take *who is sitting at the desk by the window* out of this sentence, you don't know anymore who you need to talk to. *Who is sitting at the desk by the window* is needed to identify the man. For this reason, *who is sitting at the desk by the window* is essential information, and no commas are used.

Exercise 4: Commas with Interrupters

Add commas as needed to separate interrupters. Note that not every sentence needs commas.

1. Rina's father a bus driver does shift work.
2. An elephant that is raised in a zoo cannot survive in the wild.
3. The fall of the Berlin Wall according to many political analysts marked the end of the cold war.
4. The Berlin Wall which separated East and West Berlin was a symbol of the relationship between the western and the Soviet block countries.
5. The process of pasteurization which was invented by Louis Pasteur has saved millions of lives.
6. Louis Pasteur a French scientist invented the process of pasteurization.
7. Pasteur by the age of 26 was famous for his work with crystals.
8. Later, he studied bacteriology a new field in chemistry.
9. He showed that bacteria otherwise known as germs can be killed by applying controlled heat.
10. The use of heat as a means to kill germs became known as pasteurization.

Commas Separate Direct Quotes

Commas separate direct quotes from your own writing.

She said, "Pasteur really made a difference."
"Expect snow overnight," predicted the TV weather reporter.
"Hockey," explained Sam, "is my favorite winter sport."

Commas are used when you directly quote a complete idea. When only a word or phrase is quoted, you don't need commas.

She described the television as an "idiot box".

Commas are also not used when you use indirect speech to report what someone said.

Sam explained that hockey was his favorite winter sport.

Exercise 5: Commas and Quotations

Put commas where needed to separate quotes from non-quotes. Note that not every sentence needs commas.

1. Ken asked “When’s the paper due?”
2. “I don’t know, but I hope it’s not soon” responded Cathy “because I’m still looking for my information.”
3. The instructor told them that the paper was due next Tuesday.
4. Cathy later told Ken that she was “in big trouble” because she was still looking for her information.
5. “Don’t worry” replied Ken. “I’m sure you’ll get it finished if you work hard.”
6. Cathy complained “But it’s my sister’s birthday on the weekend, and I wanted to have some fun.”
7. “School can really interfere with your social life” joked Ken.
8. That night, Cathy asked her sister if they could get together for a special dinner on Tuesday instead of on Saturday.

Commas Separate Components of Time, Number and Place

Time: *September, 1980*
 January 1, 2000
 Monday, June 14, 1999
 4:30, December 31
 6:42 a.m., July 27, 1985

Numbers: *1,364*
 23,900,000

Note: Commas with numbers have become optional in science and mathematics.

Place: *Paris, France*
 Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
 3652 Main Street, Vancouver
 700 Royal Ave., New Westminster, BC, V3L 5B2, Canada

Exercise 6: Commas with Time, Number and Place

Add commas where needed. Note that not every sentence requires commas.

1. We leave from the Vancouver airport at 7:15 a.m. April 15.
2. We arrive in Halifax Nova Scotia at about 6 o'clock that afternoon.
3. In Halifax, we will be staying at Rachel's place.
4. Actually, she lives at 655 Brown St. Dartmouth N.S., which is just across the bay from Halifax.
5. I met Rachel in June 1998 at a conference in London England.
6. Halifax had a huge fire which destroyed most of the downtown area on December 6 1917.
7. Over 1 600 people were killed in the blaze.
8. The day after we arrive, Rachel will drive us to Truro Nova Scotia where we can get on the ferry for Prince Edward Island.

Exercise 7: Finding Commas in the Real World

For each of the six comma rules, find an example of commas in use in the real world. Look in a magazine, newspaper, college textbook or novel. Copy the sentence onto the lines provided.

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1. A comma that separates an introductory part of a sentence from the main sentence.

2. Commas that separate items in a list.

3. A comma used with a coordinator to separate two complete thoughts.

4. Commas that separate words that interrupt the flow of a sentence.

5. Commas that separate a direct quotation from the rest of a sentence.

6. Commas that separate components of dates, numbers or addresses.

Exercise 8: Using the Six Comma Rules

Add commas where needed to the following sentences. Note that not every sentence needs commas.

1. David told me that he was born in Seoul Korea on April 15 1979.
2. When he was 6 years old his family moved to Trail British Columbia a small town in southcentral B.C.
3. The population of Trail at that time was only about 10 000.
4. His father worked in the smelter there and his mother ran a sewing business.
5. David learned English quickly at school but his mother didn't learn much English for a long time because she didn't get much chance to practice.
6. David had a quiet childhood and saw little of Canada.
7. He had in fact never even visited Vancouver until he came here to a basketball competition when he was in Grade 11.
8. Just before starting Grade 12 he met Henry Thompson who had recently moved to Trail to work at Selkirk College.
9. This ex-biology student from U.B.C. passionately interested in environmental issues inspired David with his talk of urban ecology.
10. David had always thought of ecology as something that only existed in the wilderness so Henry's talk of urban ecology was something new.
11. David began to think he might attend U.B.C. Simon Fraser or the University of Victoria to study biology when he finished high school.
12. In grade 12 Henry had to do a biology project on an environmental issue and he chose to focus on urban ecology.
13. He wrote about birds and mammals in the Vancouver area.
14. While doing his research he read about Douglas College's Institute of Urban Ecology which he had never heard of before.
15. David sent for information about the program and told Henry "That's the program for me."

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16. On Wednesday July 17 1998 David received notification that he had been accepted into the program.
17. Coincidentally David started life in a huge city grew up in a small town and eventually moved to a city again.
18. Furthermore he plans to spend his life studying cities.

Proofreading for Commas

The most straightforward way to proofread for commas is to read your writing out loud. When you need to pause slightly to make the writing make sense, you probably need a comma. However, be cautious because over-use of commas is a more common problem than under-use. Whenever you are in doubt about whether a comma is needed, refer back to the rules in this handout to help you make your decision.

Exercise 9: Editing a Paragraph for Commas

Add commas where they are needed in this paragraph.

Norman Bethune a Canadian doctor became a famous Canadian who is better known outside of Canada than in it. Bethune was born in Gravenhurst Ontario in 1890. As a young man he studied medicine and in 1917 he became a doctor. At the age of 36 he was stricken with tuberculosis a devastating lung disease. He spent about a year recovering. Subsequently he won worldwide fame for his experiments in lung surgery and for his invention of instruments used in chest surgery. In 1936 Bethune joined the Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War. When he developed the first mobile blood transfusion service in history his fame around the world increased. The blood transfusion service allowed doctors for the first time to provide significant treatment to soldiers near battle fronts. In 1938 Bethune went to China which was at war with Japan. Bethune organized field hospitals served as a battle surgeon and set up medical

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schools to train Chinese surgeons. In November 1938 he became medical chief of the Chinese Eighth Route Army. Unfortunately in 1939 after only 21 months in China Bethune died of blood poisoning. Despite Bethune's major medical innovations most Canadians have never heard of him. However he is considered a national hero in China and is well known in many other parts of the world.

Exercise 10: Proofreading your own Writing for Comma Errors

For this exercise, you will proofread some of your own writing.

1. Find a paragraph you have written. Alternatively, write a paragraph about the life of a famous person. As you write, don't worry about commas; that is a concern best left until after you've got the ideas on paper.
2. Read the paragraph aloud thinking about comma usage. Consult the rules in this handout. Add or take away commas as needed.

For further practice, see:

Hefferman, J. and Lincoln, J. (1992). Writing: a college handbook. New York: Norton. p. 388-396.

Oshima, A. and Hogue, A. (1981). Writing Academic English (2nd edition). Longman. p. 253-256.

Hefferman, J. and Lincoln, J. (1992). Evergreen. Toronto: Houghton Mifflin. p. 423-432.

COMMAS WITH EXERCISES - ANSWER KEY**Exercise 1: Commas and Introductory Material**

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