



THE COMMA

Related Handouts: See **TERMS TO KNOW** (Vital Sentence Elements, Clauses and Sentence Types), and **APPOSITIVES**

THE PRINCIPLE: The purpose of commas is to make sentences easier to understand by creating pauses between elements that need to be separated. To some extent, the use of commas is an art rather than a science – a matter of the writer’s personal style and intended meaning. However, following these three patterns of comma usage will help make your sentences clear:

- Use commas to separate items in a series.
- Use a comma in a compound sentence before the coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, for, yet, so*) that joins the two independent clauses (complete sentences).
- Use a comma to set off nonessential elements that precede, interrupt, or follow the **independent clause**.

I. Items in a series: If a sentence contains a list of three or more words, phrases, or clauses, separate them with commas.

Ex: Alice’s adventures in wonderland included encounters with a time-obsessed White Rabbit, a cantankerous caterpillar, a tea-drinking March Hare, a grinning Cheshire Cat, and a power-hungry Queen of Hearts.

II. Compound sentences: A sentence containing two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is a **compound sentence**, and a compound sentence needs a comma before the conjunction.

Ex: Alice tried to rescue a baby, **but** it turned into a pig.

NOTE: There’s no need for a comma before a conjunction *unless* the conjunction is joining two independent clauses.

Alice drank from a bottle and shrank to ten inches in height.
(No comma: the word “and” joins two parts of the predicate, but there is only one independent clause.)

Alice drank from a bottle, **and she** shrank to ten inches in height.
(Adding “she” to the second part of the sentence makes it a second independent clause, since it has its own **subject** and **predicate**. That means the sentence is compound, and the comma is needed.)

III. Nonessential elements: “Nonessential elements” are words, phrases or clauses that add detail to a sentence but could be removed without making the sentence incomplete.

The foundation of any sentence is its subject-verb-complement structure; this is what we call the **main** or **independent clause** – the part that can stand alone.

The Queen’s croquet game was rather odd.
(subject) (verb) (complement)

Frequently, we embellish that main clause by adding decorative (but nonessential) elements at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end. **Those extra (nonessential) words, phrases, or clauses should be set off by commas.** (And incidentally, these commas usually coincide with the natural pauses that we would make when reading the sentence aloud.)

With live hedgehogs for balls and flamingos for mallets, the Queen’s croquet game was odd.
(introductory element) (main clause)

Obviously, with hedgehogs for balls and flamingos for mallets, the croquet game was odd.
Here we have two introductory elements—a single word and a phrase—before the main clause. Both are followed by commas.

The Queen’s croquet game, like everything else Alice experienced, was rather odd.
(Underlined phrase is a nonessential element interrupting the main clause; it needs to be set off by commas on both sides.)

The Queen’s croquet game was rather odd, with no particular rules.
(Underlined phrase is a nonessential element following the main clause)

A WORD OF CAUTION: DON’T OVERDOSE ON COMMAS!

You should NOT use a comma to separate the **complete subject** of a sentence from its **complete predicate**.

WRONG: Alice’s only way to escape from Wonderland, was to wake up.
RIGHT: Alice’s only way to escape from Wonderland was to wake up.

Generally speaking, you should leave commas out of a sentence unless you have a series, a compound sentence, or a nonessential element to set off.

Here’s one final example to illustrate all our comma guidelines:

Ever since the author, Lewis Carroll, dreamed up *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, his book has
(commas to set off nonessential **appositive**) (comma to set off introductory element)
amused millions of readers with its mad tea parties, its crazy croquet games, and its incredible shrinking
(commas to separate items in a series)

heroine, but it may have frightened some children as well.
(comma before conjunction in compound sentence)