

Comma Rules

- **Rule 1: To separate items in a series**

A series is a list of three or more items, the last two of which are joined by and, or, or nor.

A series may consist of words, phrases, or clauses.

Examples:

- He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base.
- The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.
- The prosecutor argued that the defendant, who was at the scene of the crime, who had a strong revenge motive, and who had access to the murder weapon, was guilty of homicide.

NOTE: The items in a series should be parallel in form.

- **Rule 2: With a coordinating conjunction for a compound sentence**

Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS): *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*.

Example: I ate an apple, yet I wasn't really hungry.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO CREATE A COMMA SPLICE! A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are separated by a comma.

Example of a Comma Splice: (Boooooo!)

Dan struggled with his homework, his father helped him finish it.

To correct a comma splice:

- add a semi-colon between each independent clause
- create two separate sentences
- insert a FANBOY between the two independent clauses (after a comma)

- **Rule 3: After introductory words, phrases, or clauses**

Transition word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence

Example: Therefore, people generally eat dessert after every meal.

Prepositional phrase at the beginning of a sentence

Example: Over the hill, rabbits jump in and out of tiny holes to hide from humans.

After a dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence

(REMEMBER: A dependent clause begins with a subordinating conjunction!)

Example: Whether or not she pays me back, I am still going to loan her the money.

- **Rule 4: Nouns of direct address**

Example: John, can you come help me with my homework?

Example: I will get there, Sam, when I am finished with this project.

- **Rule 5: Appositives**

Example: My teacher, Mrs. Wood, taught me a new song.

Example: Mrs. Green, our music teacher, can play the piano really well!

- **Rule 6: Between two or more adjectives that describe one noun**

Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.

Example: She wore a pink, polka-dotted, long skirt.

- **Rule 7: To separate dates and addresses**

Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

Example: Dallas, Texas

Example: November 12, 2012

- **Rule 8: Nonessential phrases and clauses**

Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are NOT essential to the meaning of the sentence. You could easily remove the phrase in between the commas, and the sentence would still make sense.

Example where a comma is used:

My brother, who lives across town, plans to throw a party.

This information inside the commas can be eliminated from the sentence without jeopardizing the meaning of the sentence.

Example where a comma is NOT used:

The people who work in my office are loud.

The reason a comma is not used is that the phrase “who work in my office” is essential to understanding which people are loud.

NOTE: Do not use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with *that* (relative clauses). *That* clauses after nouns are always essential. *That* clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential. The word “that” is almost always an indicator of an essential phrase or clause.

Example: The chocolate cake that I had at Joe’s was tasty.

- **Rule 9: Before direct quotations**

Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

Example: She sighed and murmured, “If you can’t come to the movies with us, I guess I just won’t go.”

- **Rule 10: Salutation and closing of a letter**

Dear Fred,

Yours truly,

Sincerely,