

A Concise Guide to Commas

Use commas in four ways...

1. To join two complete sentences (independent clauses), along with a coordinating conjunction:

- She loved him, for he had won her heart with song.
 - He spilled the gasoline tank, and he accidentally lit the parking lot on fire.
 - I am not amused, nor will I let you go unpunished.
 - The book was helpful, but it did not answer all of her questions.
 - I can pick you up at home, or you can drive straight from work.
 - Franklin Roosevelt was a popular president, yet his four terms inspired term limits.
 - Jenny decided to improve her grades, so she looked for a tutor.
- ❖ *Note: The coordinating conjunctions are for, and, nor, but, or, yet, & so (FANBOYS).*

Fixing a Common Error: The Comma Splice

Example: Baylor is the world's largest Baptist university, it also aims to be a respected research university.

- ✓ A comma splice joins two complete sentences (independent clauses) together with only a comma, which is a serious error. It needs a conjunction in addition to the comma.

Corrected Example: Baylor is the world's largest Baptist university, and it also aims to be a respected research university.

- ✓ A comma splice is wrong because commas are very weak pauses. It is a form of run-on sentence. You need a stronger pause or a clearer transition between the two separate thoughts.
- ✓ First, identify subjects and verbs and see how many complete sentences (independent clauses) you have in your sentence. Wherever a new sentence (clause) begins, you need a comma with a conjunction *or* a stronger punctuation mark than a comma.
- ✓ If you don't want to add a conjunction, you may change the comma into a semi-colon, or in some cases a colon or a dash, which insert stronger breaks between clauses.

Corrected Example: Baylor is the world's largest Baptist university; it also aims to be a respected research university.

- ✓ You could also change the comma into a period if you decide the two thoughts are not closely related in meaning.

Corrected Example: Baylor is the world's largest Baptist university. It also aims to be a respected research university.

2. After an introductory word or phrase, before the main sentence begins:

- Losing track of time, Sarah forgot to do her homework.
 - She assumed that I loved Elmo; actually, I prefer Cookie Monster to Elmo.
 - In addition, she has demonstrated advanced analytical ability.
 - Mark Twain said, "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."
 - Before I met Ellie, I did not know how special a goldfish could be.
 - Because he is young, the teacher is frequently mistaken for a student.
 - Since I am here already, I will help with set-up.
- ❖ *Note that many of these introductory elements are transition words.*

3. To set off interruptions, non-essential information, or non-restrictive elements:

- My friend Bob, who was expelled, loved to host parties.
 - Joe, my best friend, recommended the Writing Center.
 - James, however, is more creative.
 - My mom always made dinner from scratch, which saved money but took time.
- ❖ *This is the kind of information you could also set off between parentheses or dashes. Stylistically, commas are preferable to parentheses because they are less disruptive. Dashes can feel more dramatic—calling attention to the non-restrictive phrase—but don't over-use them. To create a dash on your computer, type two hyphens.*
- ❖ *Non-restrictive phrases can come in the middle or at the end of a sentence. If at the end, there is only a comma before the phrase. If the phrase starts with "that," do not use commas at all.*

4. To separate items in a list, date, or location:

- The red, delicious apple fell to the ground.
- My vacation to Miami, Florida, was over too quickly.
- The new professor moved on August 1, 1995, to Waco, Texas.
- My favorite shows are *The Office*, *Breaking Bad*, and *M*A*S*H*.
- The candidates are focused on independent, undecided, and swing-state voters.

Comma Exercises: *Add commas where needed and identify which of the four rules you used.*

She enjoys running yet she does not want to train for a marathon.

I have a dog and need to buy him some food.

Because I studied for my test earlier I can go out to dinner with my friends.

He stayed up all night because he had procrastinated.

Having studied well he slept soundly.

As a young man he participated in Boy Scouts.

However the teacher may give a reading quiz.

Dr. Smith for example had to deal with many malpractice lawsuits.

My college Baylor University builds wonderful communities in the residence halls.

She had a happy healthy childhood.

I need carrots chicken and lettuce from the store.

The movie that I checked out from the library was interesting.