

# HOW TO USE COMMAS

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What is it? A comma is “a punctuation mark that separates words or groups of words within sentences.”<sup>1</sup>

## When Should You Use Commas?

### Lists or Series

- Commas are used to divide a list of three or more items. However, they are not required (but recommended) between the last two items in the list.
  - David decided to sell his car, fly to Germany, and eat sausages.
- When you have a list of *adjectives* (describing words), use commas only if all the adjectives describe the noun in different ways. One way to test this is to see if the adjectives can be joined with “and.” If so, you should use commas to separate the adjectives.
  - A large, hairy spider startled Miss Muffett. (“Large and hairy” would also make sense.)
- Other adjectives are cumulative because they depend on one other. (That is to say, each adjective depends on both the noun and the other adjective(s) that describe it.) Cumulative adjectives cannot be joined with “and,” so they should **not** be separated by commas.
  - Several black clouds threatened to rain on the outdoor concert. (“Several and black” would not make sense.)

### Introductory and Transitional Phrases

- Commas are used to separate an introduction or transition phrase (or word) that is used at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.
  - In times like these, I recommend wearing boots and carrying a raincoat.
  - You do know, however, that every cloud has a silver lining.

### Before Direct Speech

- Commas are used to introduce *direct speech* (a quote or words someone actually spoke).
  - Laura advises, “Run outside as often as you choose, but do not faint.”

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<sup>1</sup> Laurie Kirszner and Stephen Mandell, *Writing First*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Bedford, 2012), 584.

## Connecting Two Complete Thoughts

- Commas are used to connect two complete thoughts joined by a *conjunction* (a word that connects separate thoughts such as: and, or, nor, but, for, while, yet, so).
  - I wanted to go to the coffee shop, but I had to buy paper clips instead.

## Appositives and Nonessential Elements

- Commas are used to separate *appositives* (nouns or noun phrases that rename a nearby noun) and to separate pieces of nonessential information. An element is nonessential if it can be removed without significantly changing the meaning of the sentence.
  - Bilbo Baggins loves his home, the Shire. (Appositive)
  - Van Gogh's painting, one of my favorite pieces, hangs in New York City's Museum of Modern Art. (Nonessential Information)

## Addresses or Dates

- On Friday, September 12, 1873, the first functional typewriter was sold to customers.
- Tyndale University is located at 3377 Bayview Ave, North York, Ontario, M2M 3S4.

## When You Should *Not* Use Commas?

**Never place a comma between the subject (what or who is being discussed or described) and the main verb of the sentence.**

- × Incorrect: Getting enough sleep during mid-terms, is sometimes difficult.
- ✓ Correct: Getting enough sleep during mid-terms is sometimes difficult.

**If a sentence has two main verbs (*compound verbs*), never place a comma between the two.**

- × Incorrect: I sat on a roof, and looked at the stars.
- ✓ Correct: I sat on a roof and looked at the stars.

**Never use a comma to separate essential information. An element is essential if it cannot be removed from the sentence without significantly altering the sentence's meaning.**

- × Incorrect: Students, who fail to study, will not succeed in school.
- ✓ Correct: Students who fail to study will not succeed in school.