

Commas

In *The Chicago Manual of Style*, there are approximately 40 sub-topics under the heading, "Commas." It's no wonder so many of us struggle with commas; there are so many possibilities. In this document, we'll focus on five of the most common uses of commas. Get a handle on these, and you'll be on your way to becoming a competent user of commas.

- Use a comma before a conjunction that connects two independent clauses.
- Use commas to separate elements in a series of three or more.
- Use a comma after an introductory element in a sentence.
- Use a comma to surround a sentence interrupter.
- Use a comma to separate the elements in a place or date.

Use a comma before a conjunction that connects two independent clauses.

In other words, if you have a sentence with a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), take a look at what's on either side of that conjunction. If you have an independent clause (i.e., some text that could stand all by itself as a complete sentence) on each side of the conjunction, then you need a comma before that conjunction. Consider the following examples:

Jan walked the dog and Bernie mowed the lawn.

Bonnie went to the store and the bank.

Notice that both sentences contain the conjunction "and." Now, look at what shows up on either side of that conjunction. In the first sentence, you have the following:

Jan walked the dog

Bernie mowed the lawn

Each of these has an actor or subject (Jan/Bernie) and an action (walked/mowed) and can stand alone as a complete sentence. The insertion of the conjunction "and" turns these two sentences into a single sentence, so you need to insert a comma before the conjunction. Jan walked the dog, and Bernie mowed the lawn.

Now, look at what shows up on either side of the conjunction in the second sentence.

Bonnie went to the store

The bank

Notice that the text that comes after the conjunction (the bank) cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence. Therefore, no comma is needed. Bonnie went to the store and the bank.

Use a comma to separate elements in a series of three or more.

When your sentence includes a list of three or more, place a comma after each item except the last.

Bonnie went to the store, the bank, and the post office.

To complete the task, you'll need a hammer, some nails, a saw, and some bandages.

Note: There are some styles that omit the comma before the last item. Associated Press style, used in many magazines, newsletters, and newspapers, is one such exception.

Use a comma after an introductory element in a sentence.

Introductory elements are words that show up at the beginning of your sentence, before the **actor** (subject) or action (**verb**). Consider the following examples:

- Yesterday *I bought* a new bike.
- After installing the software *you can restart* your computer.
- In spite of my many errors *we still won* the game.

Notice that there is text that comes before the actors (I/you/we) and the actions (bought/restart/won) in each sentence. These are introductory elements and are followed by a comma.

- Yesterday, *I bought* a new bike.
- After installing the software, *you can restart* your computer.
- In spite of my many errors, *we still won* the game.

Use a comma to surround a sentence interrupter.

Sentence interrupters are words that show up somewhere in the middle of your sentence that could be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. Consider the following example:

My cousin Jonny McMertsickle plays professional baseball.

In this sentence, you could remove "Jonny McMertsickle" and the meaning of the sentence would not change.

My cousin plays professional baseball.

"Jonny McMertsickle" is an example of a sentence interrupter and should be surrounded by commas.

My cousin, Jonny McMertsickle, plays professional baseball.

While many things can be sentence interrupters, keep a close eye out for names and titles as they frequently serve in this role.

Use a comma to separate elements in places and dates.

When listing a location in the text of a document, separate each of the elements (e.g., street address, city, state, ZIP code) with a comma, as shown in the following example:

I live at 100 Main Street, Metro, Montana, where I also work.

The same holds true for dates. In the context of a sentence, separate each element of a date (e.g., day of the week, calendar date, year) with a comma, as shown in the following example:

I was born on Tuesday, January 9, 1976, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Links to Additional Information

- "[Commas](#)" from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- "[Using Commas](#)" from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab