

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 commas 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.

To use a coordinating conjunction, sometimes referred to as FANBOYS because the only seven coordinating conjunctions are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*, you must look on both sides of that conjunction. If you have an independent clause (i.e. a 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: It is acceptable to omit the comma before the last item unless confusion would result. Here's an example of that:

Attending the family reunion were his two sons, Fred Amorbe and Nick Garafano.

In this example, it seems as if the two sons are Fred Amorbe and Nick Garafano, but the truth is that Fred and Nick were in attendance along with the two sons.

Regardless, in other situations where the final comma in the list is optional, you must be consistent throughout a document. With all lists within the document, you must put the final comma in, OR you must omit that final comma.

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 that should be 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 commas 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 and/or omitting necessary detail. Consider the following example:

My oldest cousin Jonny McMertsickle plays professional baseball.

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

My oldest cousin plays professional baseball.

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

My oldest 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. But, there can be lots of other kinds of interrupters, too:

- *The Harry Potter series, which is enjoyed by people of all ages, is truly unique!*
- *Fresh vegetables, such as snow peas and red peppers, are great in stir fry.*
- *Mandy, by the way, is a fraternal twin.*

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.

I live at 100 Main Street, Great Falls, Montana, and work in a nearby community.

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.

I was born on Tuesday, January 9, 1996, in St. Louis, Missouri.