

Commas

The comma (,) is a versatile punctuation mark. This resource explains five of the most common uses of the comma:

1. To join a dependent clause to an independent clause
2. To pair with a coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses
3. To punctuate a non-restrictive element
4. To punctuate an introductory element
5. To separate the items in a list

For additional guidance on how to use commas, consult the extensive Purdue OWL here:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/extended_rules_for_commas.html

Of course, our tutors at the Cottey College Writing Center can also help you master this tricky punctuation mark!

Using Commas to Join a Dependent Clause to an Independent Clause

First, see our resource on Sentence Fragments and Run-on Sentences here to learn more about dependent and independent clauses: <https://cottey.edu/pdf/academics/owl/Sentence%20Fragments%20and%20Run-ons.pdf>

Recall that dependent clauses cannot stand alone as their own sentences. They must be joined to an independent clause (a complete sentence), either before the independent clause or after it. Example:

Dependent clause: **Because I studied hard.** (notice this **cannot** stand alone as a sentence)

Independent clause: **I passed the test.** (notice this **can** stand alone as a sentence)

Putting the dependent clause first: **Because I studied hard, I passed the test.**

Putting the independent clause first: **I passed the test because I studied hard.**

As you can see, if the dependent clause is placed *before* the independent clause, a comma is placed directly after the dependent clause. No comma is needed if the independent clause comes first, however.

Using Commas With Coordinating Conjunctions to Join Two Independent Clauses

We can also use a comma to join two independent clauses. If we do, we must pair the comma with a **coordinating conjunction**. The most common coordinating conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *or*, and *so*. Example:

Independent clause 1: **I studied hard.**

Independent clause 2: **I passed the test.**

Joining the independent clauses: **I studied hard, so I passed the test.**

Note: Be sure to select a conjunction that fits your meaning. In this example, *so* is the best conjunction for conveying a sense of cause-and-effect (I passed the test as a result of studying hard). *And* could work but would not convey the same sense of cause-and-effect. *But* implies contrast, so it would not fit our meaning. Similarly, *or* does not fit well here.

Using Commas to Punctuate Non-restrictive Elements

First, see our resource on Restrictive and Non-restrictive Elements:

<https://cottey.edu/pdf/academics/owl/Restrictive%20and%20Non-restrictive%20Elements.pdf>

Recall that **restrictive elements** provide information about a noun that distinguishes it from similar things. Examples:

Computers that run slowly should be replaced. (not all computers should be replaced, so *that run slowly* is necessary to separate these computers from other computers)

The class which meets on Tuesday is my favorite. (*which meets on Tuesday* is needed to distinguish this particular class from all the other classes the person is taking)

In contrast, **non-restrictive elements** provide additional information about a noun but are not necessary to identifying that noun or distinguishing it from similar things. Examples:

Joe Biden, who is the 46th president, gave a speech. (*who is the 46th president* is not necessary for identifying Biden)
I grew up in Little Rock, which is the capital of Arkansas. (*which is the capital of Arkansas* is not necessary)

Commas are placed **before and after** non-restrictive elements (unless the non-restrictive element comes at the end of the sentence, as in the *Little Rock* example above). Commas are **not** used with restrictive elements.

Using Commas to Punctuate Introductory Elements

An **introductory element** is a word or phrase that comes at the beginning of a sentence and provides some kind of context for the sentence. Unfortunately, you must simply learn to recognize them with practice. Examples:

On November 3, 2020, Joe Biden won the presidential election. (indicates when the action happens)
In some states, it is illegal to wear a duck on your head. (indicates where the action happens)
Running at breakneck speed, he came crashing through the door. (indicates how the action happens)
Surprisingly, no armadillos reside in Armadillo City. (comments on the action—adverbs such as *surprisingly*, *hopefully*, *thankfully*, and *regretfully* are frequently used in this way)

Commas are placed immediately after introductory elements to separate them from the rest of the sentence.

Using Commas to Separate the Items in a List

A **list** of items, also called a **series**, is a string of three or more words that all belong to the same part of speech. Commas are placed after each item **except for the last one** to separate the items from each other. Examples:

The recipe calls for eggs, milk, butter, and sugar. (the items are all nouns)
I need to take out the trash, wash the dishes, and brush my teeth before bed. (the items are all verbs)
She is a smart, witty, and kind-hearted person. (the items are all adjectives)
We can either complete this project quickly, quietly, or correctly. (the items are all adverbs)

Notice that the conjunctions *and* and *but* come immediately before the last item in the list (this conjunction can sometimes be omitted if the items are adjectives; e.g., She is a smart, witty, kind-hearted person).

Note: All items in a list must belong to the same part of speech in order to achieve grammatical **parallelism**.

Incorrect: I am a reader, a runner, and like to go climbing. (we have mixed two nouns and a verb)

Correct: I am a reader, a runner, and a climber. (now, all three items are nouns)

Correct: I read, run, and climb. (now, all three items are verbs)

Note: The last comma in a list—the one that comes before the *and* or *or*—is called the **serial comma** (or **Oxford comma**) and is occasionally omitted. However, it is a good idea to always use it, as omitting it can result in ambiguity.

Note: If a list includes items that already have commas, we can use semicolons to separate the items for clarity. Example:

Unclear: I traveled to Dallas, Texas, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Springfield, Missouri.

Clear: I traveled to Dallas, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Springfield, Missouri.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

<https://cottey.edu/campus-community/kolderie-center/learning-center/writing-center/>