

Commas



Commas are used to separate structural elements within sentences. This separation breaks sentences into manageable parts for the reader by grouping words together and highlighting important parts of the sentence. To help you use commas effectively and correctly, here are tips on how to proofread for common comma mistakes.

Compound Sentence Commas

- Skim your paper, looking only for the seven coordinating conjunctions: **and, nor, but, so, for, or, yet**.
- Stop at each of these words to see whether there is an independent clause (a complete sentence) on both sides of it.
- If so, place a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Examples:

She wanted to buy a new car, **but** she didn't have enough money to do so.

The wind blew fiercely, **and** the rain poured down.

Disruptive Commas between Compound Verbs or Objects

- Skim your paper, stopping only at the coordinating conjunctions listed above.
- Check to see if there is an independent clause (complete sentence) on both sides of the conjunction. If so, place a comma before the conjunction. If not, do not place a comma before the conjunction.

Example:

disruptive comma: They bought two pizzas, but ate only one. (“ate only one” cannot stand alone)

correct: They bought two pizzas but ate only one.

Disruptive Commas between Subjects and Verbs

- Find the subject and verb in each of your sentences.
- Make sure that you have not separated the subject from the verb with a comma.

Example:

disruptive: The train coming down the track, is going to be late..

correct: The train coming down the track is going to be late.

Comma Splices

- Skim your paper, stopping at every comma.
- Determine whether you have an independent clause on both sides of the comma.
- If so, change the sentence in one of the following ways:
Reword the sentence to change one clause into a subordinate (or dependent) clause.
Add a coordinating conjunction after the comma.
Replace the comma with a semicolon.

Example:

comma splice: Americans speak too rapidly, this is a common complaint by foreign visitors.

correct: Americans speak too rapidly; this is a common complaint by foreign visitors.

Introductory Commas after Dependent Clauses

- Skim your paper, looking only at the first two or three words of each sentence.
- Stop if one of these words is a dependent marker such as: **while, because, when, if, after, etc.**
- Usually, these are introductory adverbial clauses that specify where, when, how, why, to what extent, or under what conditions.
- If there is an introductory dependent clause, place a comma after the dependent clause. A dependent clause is part of a sentence that cannot stand on its own.

Examples:

Other Introductory Commas

- Skim your paper, looking only at the first word or two of each sentence.
- Stop if the word or phrase ends in -ing (gerund), is an infinitive (to + verb), or is an introductory word (well, yes, moreover, etc.).
- Place a comma at the end of the introductory phrase.

Examples:

To get a good grade, you must turn in all your homework.

Walking to work, Jim stopped for coffee at the diner.

Yes, I agree that the exam was difficult.

- If the sentence begins with a prepositional phrase (a phrase beginning with a preposition, such as: **in, at, on, between, with,** etc.), place a comma after the prepositional phrase if it is longer than three words or suggests a distinct pause before the main clause.

Examples:

In those days we wrote with a pen and paper.

Across the street from the library, an old man waited for a bus.

Series Commas

- Skim your paper, stopping at the conjunctions.
- Check to see if these conjunctions link words, phrases, or clauses written in a series or list.
- If so, place commas after each word, phrase, or clause in the series and before the coordinating conjunction (and) before the last item in the list.

Example:

Dieters should avoid eggs, meat, and tropical oils.

Commas with Nonessential Elements

- Skim your paper, looking for a phrase or clause in each sentence that explains or gives more information about a word or phrase that comes before it.
- If you can delete the phrase or clause and still keep the meaning, the phrase or clause is probably nonessential and needs two commas, one before and one after.
- As an alternative test for a nonessential phrase or clause, try saying “by the way” before it. If that seems appropriate to the meaning, the phrase or clause is probably nonessential. In the first example below, the clause *who cheat* is essential; in the second, the clause *who often cheats* is nonessential.
- Non-essential elements are often “which” or “that” clauses. In the first example, “who cheat” tells us *which* students, so it is essential. In the second example, we already know which student (Fred), so “who often cheats” is a nonessential element.

Example:

Students who cheat only harm themselves.

Fred, who often cheats, is just harming himself.

Connors Writing Center Dimond Library 329 . UNH . writing.center@unh.edu 603-862-3272

This handout was adapted from: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_commaproof.html. Copyright 1995-2004 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved. Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at: <http://owl.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html>.