

Six Most Common Comma Usages

WHAT IS A COMMA?

- A comma is a punctuation mark that separates words, ideas or phrases within a sentence. It is also used to indicate a pause, or caesura, in a sentence.

WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF A COMMA?

- There are many functions of a comma, but there are six important usages that every writer should know and follow. These six functions are listed below.

EXAMPLES

1.

Independent Clauses

⇒ An independent clause is a group of words that contains both a subject and a predicate and can stand alone as a complete sentence. Use a comma before *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *yet*, and *so* when they are used to connect two independent clauses.

I would love to attend your party, but I have a previous engagement.

- Remember: Make sure that the sentence is in fact made up of two independent clauses. The following sentence does not need a comma because it is made up of only one independent clause with one subject and two verbs.

Emma needed to get to work but didn't have a ride.

Dependent Clauses

2.

⇒ A dependent clause is one that cannot stand alone as a complete sentence and when used in the beginning of a sentence is set apart from the rest of the sentence using a comma. This constitutes an introductory element. Below are examples of comma usage with introductory elements.

Transitional Words and Phrases:

- Use a comma after a transitional word or phrase (such as *however*, *moreover*, *finally*, *therefore*, *of course*, *by the way*, *on the other hand*) when it is used in the beginning of a sentence.

Yes, I would love to go.

Well, I don't know if that is a good idea.

More Dependent Clauses

Verbal and Prepositional Phrases:

⇒ Use a comma after a phrase that begins with a preposition, a participle, or an infinitive in a sentence.

During the semester, I always have several papers to write.

Knowing that she didn't have time to go, she kindly declined the invitation.

To avoid punishment, the girl finally told the truth.

- Note: Do not use a comma to set off a dependent clause at the end of a sentence.

You can do the dishes **after you have eaten.**

Mom always hangs her key by the door **when she gets home.**

3.

Items in a Series

⇒ Use a comma to separate three or more words or phrases in a series.

Mike's favorite sports are football, soccer, and tennis.

She woke up early, ate breakfast, took a shower, and was on her way.

Essential and Nonessential Clauses

4.

⇒ A clause may be essential or nonessential depending upon its relationship to the meaning of the sentence. Nonessential clauses may be interesting to add, but the sentence would still be clear without it. Use commas around nonessential clauses in a sentence. Note: If an essential or nonessential clause is describing a noun or pronoun in a sentence, it is called an appositive clause.

Professor McEwan, **the Director of the Writing Center,** works Monday through Friday.

Specifying that Professor McEwan is the Director of the Writing Center does not change the meaning of the sentence. Therefore, the Director of the Writing Center is a nonessential clause and is separated with commas.

The woman **who is the Director of the Writing Center** works Monday through Friday.

However, in this example, the clause "who is the Director of the Writing Center" is an essential clause because it identifies the woman being referred to in the sentence. Therefore, this clause does not need commas around it.

5.

Direct Quotations

⇒ Use commas to set off a direct quotation in a sentence. A comma can be placed before or after the quote but is always placed in accordance with the identifying tag. The identifying tag is the phrase that identifies the speaker in the sentence (i.e. *she said*). Note: The comma always lies within the closing quotation marks.

“I have always wanted to be a doctor,” my sister announced.

“Hang up your towel after your shower,” my mom instructed my brother, “or else it won’t dry properly.”

Professor Smith said to the class, “Please be on time for all classes and bring all necessary materials.”

- Remember: When the identifying tag comes between two completely quoted sentences, a period follows the identifying tag.

“I wonder how long they have known each other,” Maria pondered. “It seems as if they get along so well.”

“Do you think we’ll have enough time?” Maria asked. “We’re running pretty late.”

Everyday Material

6.

⇒ Everyday material can be defined as dates, addresses and locations, and professional titles. Each has its own set of rules in regards to comma placement in a sentence.

Dates:

⇒ Use a comma after the date and the year in a sentence.

Paul was born on August 17, 1983, in a small town in New Jersey.

Annie’s graduation party will be held on June 16, 2007, at 6’oclock in the evening.

- Remember: When using only the month and the year in a sentence, no comma is needed.

December 2006 was the warmest December on record in New Jersey since temperatures were first recorded in 1895.

More Everyday Material

Addresses and Locations:

⇒ When a location has two or more parts to it, a comma is needed after each part in the sentence.

Fran has always wanted to travel to Florence, Italy, but she has never had the chance.

- Remember: If the two locations are joined using a preposition or if only one location is listed, no comma is needed.

**Pennsylvania is my favorite state because of all the open spaces.
The weather in Albany in New York is very different from the weather in Albany in California.**

⇒ A comma is needed to separate parts of an address when two or more parts are used.

Write to Angela Beaver at 546 West Front Street, Burtonsville, Maryland 20866.

- Remember: If an address is written out line by line, no comma is needed after the street address.

**Angela Beaver
546 West Front Street
Burtonsville, MD 20866**

Professional Titles:

⇒ A comma is needed to set off a professional title in a sentence.

Glen Bradford, M.D., will be speaking at a conference at the end of this month.