



WRITING CENTER

Library and Academic Resource Center (LARC 229)

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Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

THE COMMA

The *comma* is a form of punctuation that was designed to prevent confusion within a sentence and to prevent the misreading of the sentence. The following are the most common rules for comma use. (The directions for comma use are followed by at least one example.)

- ❖ *Use the comma to set off three or more different items in a list.*
Jessica bought a calculator, graph paper, and a textbook for her Calculus class.
- ❖ *Use the comma to separate lists of adjectives.*
Frank’s hair is short, spiky, and green.
- ❖ *Use the comma to set off direct quotes or dialog.*
Fran said, “You’re my hero.”
“I love football,” said Josie, “because it is brutal.”
“Rap is my favorite music,” declared Mike.
- ❖ *Use the comma to set off interjections, such as yes or no.*
No, I do not want any lemon slices.
Your hair looks lovely today, Bob.
- ❖ *Use the comma according to the rules of names, dates, addresses, place names, measurements, numbers, personal letters, and titles.*

Directions:	Example:
When writing a person’s last name first, use a comma.	Vasquez, Emilio Lee, Susie
When writing the date, use a comma between the date of the month and year, and between the day of the week and the date.	February 1, 2002 Monday, March third Thursday, May 21, 1980
When writing an address, use a comma between the street address, the city, the state, and the country.	Julie lives at 555 North Sycamore St., Los Angeles, CA 90011. Marisol is from San Antonio, Texas.
Use commas between units of measurement.	Carolina’s kitten weighs four pounds, three ounces.
Use a comma after salutations and closings in personal letters.	Dear Lucia, Sincerely,
Use a comma between a person’s name and their degree, title, or additional name elements.	Raul Salcedo, Jr. is running for Class President.

	Sally Diamond, PhD., wrote her dissertation on the use of light in paintings of the Impressionist period.
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❖ *Use the comma to separate independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.*

- Independent clauses have a subject and a verb and may stand on their own as a complete thought.

Example: Keiko's twenty-first birthday is an important event. We enjoyed the Picasso exhibit.

- Coordinating conjunctions, also known as FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), are used to connect a pair or a series of related ideas.

Example: Keiko's twenty-first birthday is an important event, so I plan to throw her a party.

We visited the Museum of Modern Art, and we enjoyed the Picasso exhibit.

❖ *Use the comma to set off an introductory group of words.*

- The most common introductory word groups are clauses or phrases that function as adverbs and tell the reader when, where, how, why, or under what circumstances the main action of the sentence occurred.

Example: When an earthquake occurs, people take shelter.
Without seeing the motor, Jennie could not tell what was broken.
To swim the English Channel, an athlete must be in excellent shape.
All in all, the Prom was a huge success.

❖ *Use the comma to set off clauses that provide additional information, but are not grammatically necessary to the sentence (nonrestrictive clauses and phrases).*

- A nonrestrictive clause describes a noun or pronoun whose meaning has already been clearly defined or limited. The nonrestrictive clause provides the reader with “extra” information about the noun or pronoun. The nonrestrictive element does not change the meaning of the sentence. If the nonrestrictive clause was removed the meaning of the sentence would still remain intact. The underlined phrases below are nonrestrictive elements.

Example: My wife, the surgeon, has been at work all night.
Modernist Literature, which flourished after World War One, emphasized experimental writing techniques.

Carl, the art teacher, is on vacation.

- Restrictive elements provide essential information that define or limit the previous words. Do not use the comma when writing with a restrictive element. The underlined phrases below are restrictive elements.

Example: Shirts like these are too expensive.

My sister Tabitha is a librarian. (This element is restrictive because the author may have more than one sister and is clarifying which sister she/he is referring to.)

The dog that was barking last night kept me awake.

❖ *Use the comma to set off parenthetical, interrogative, and transitional expressions.*

- Parenthetical phrases, also known as appositives, provide supplemental comments or information and usually interrupt the flow of a sentence.

Example: In almost every meal, especially in Italian cuisine, the cook begins by sautéing onions and garlic.

- Interrogative expressions are used at the end of the sentence as an afterthought. The interrogative expression asks a question.

Example: You agree that the California Redwoods should be preserved, right?

- Transitional expressions serve as bridges between sentences or parts of sentences. They usually use words and phrases such as however, moreover, therefore, and for example.

Example: I would like to attend the party; however, I do not have the address.

❖ *Use the comma to prevent confusion or misreading.*

DO: After eating, Frank Jacob went to the movies.

DON'T: After eating Frank, Jacob went to the movies.

❖ *Use the comma to indicate an omitted word or words.*

Example: Sara leaves work at 7:00, Cordelia, at 8:00.



Figure 2 A confused spider

Exercise 1:**Place commas in the following sentences.**

1. June the sports announcer prefers basketball.
2. The teddy bear is brown soft and has buttons for eyes.
3. In the spring wildflowers bloom on the mountainside.
4. Josh asked "will you go to the dance with me?"
5. Yes I can make potato salad.
6. Today is August 9 1980.
7. Louis and I plan to vacation in Toledo Ohio.
8. Ernie Bertson MD practices medicine at the local hospital.
9. The soup needs more salt don't you agree?
10. Before visiting Robert went to the store.
- 11.

Exercise 2:**Remove the commas that are used improperly. Add commas where necessary.**

1. We went to New York on May, 31, 2002.
2. Carla, the lawyer hates to dust the furniture.
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, *The Great Gatsby*, and *This Side of Paradise*.
4. "Carol called," I told her, as she walked in the door.
5. Lucy walked to the store and bought a pound of meat.
6. Joshua, the chef's son, cannot bake a pie, to save his life.
7. Delia, needs a microscope cell samples and a notebook.
8. When I asked my mother about the equation, she told me, to look it up.
9. Daisy weighed 6 pounds 7 ounces, when she was born.
10. All in all, the festival, was a success.



Figure 3 A drawing of an owl reading

Exercise 3:**The following sentences incorporate either restrictive or nonrestrictive elements. Underline the element and add commas where necessary.**

1. Many Russian authors such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky spoke both Russian and French.
2. The computer in the living room is not working.
3. Rain that falls in the afternoon makes me sleepy.
4. My brother Clarence loves the movie "It's a Wonderful Life." (The author has only one brother).
5. My brother Clarence loves the movie "It's a Wonderful Life." (The author has several brothers and is referring to Clarence).
6. Shoes like these pinch my toes.
7. This movie which was released twenty years ago still has meaning today.
8. MLA format which is outlined in the textbook is required for this assignment.
9. The clown at the fair makes balloon animals.

10. This painting created by Monet is an example of Impressionism.

Exercise 4:

Insert commas where needed. In the space provided below each sentence, summarize briefly the rule that explains the use of the comma or commas.

1. The best features of my new apartment are its large kitchen its bay window and its low rent.
2. Because we got in line at dawn we were among the first to get tickets for the concert.
3. "When will someone invent a telephone" Lola asked "that will only ring at convenient moments?"
4. Without opening his eyes, Simon stumbled out of bed and opened the door for the whining dog.
5. I think Floyd that you had better ask someone else for your \$2500 loan.

For answers to the exercises, please visit the Writing Center.

This handout is based on the following books

Eschholz, Rosa. The Writer's Brief Handbook, 3ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. 187-198.

Hopper, Vincent F. et al. Essentials of English, 4ed. Hauppauge: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1990. 121-129.

Langan, John. English Skills, 6ed. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1997. 482-491.

Strumph, Michael and Ariel Douglas. The Grammar Bible. Los Angeles: Knowledgeopolis, 1999.

Revised: 06/14/2018