

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 in a sentence.

WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF A COMMA?

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

Independent Clause

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.

The second subject "I" starts the second independent clause.

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.

Matt needed to go to work but didn't have a ride.

It's missing a subject, so no comma is necessary.

Dependent Clause

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, 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.

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.

Essential and Non-essential Clauses

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 Chen, the Director of the Writing Center, works late on Mondays.

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 late on Mondays.

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.

Items in a Series

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

I went to the park, the mall, and the museum after work.

Direct Quotations

Use commas to set off a direct quotation in a sentence.

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

Everyday Material

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:

She went to Mexico on February 15, 2013.

Address:

The White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC.
I went to San Francisco, California last summer.

Professional Title:

Dr. Jonesin, PhD., teaches three classes in the fall.