



# The Comma Guide

## What it's for:

- Indicate a pause
- Separate independent clauses
- Separate words in a list
- Dates
- Places
- Dialogue



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## Rules and Exceptions

### Rule 1

- Use commas to separate words and **word groups** in a simple series of three or more items.

#### Example:

My estate goes to my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and nephew.

**Note:** When the last comma in a series comes before *and* or *or*, it is known as the **Oxford comma**. Most newspapers and magazines drop the Oxford comma in a simple series. However, the omission of the Oxford comma can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

#### Example:

We had coffee, cheese and crackers, and grapes.

- Adding a comma after *crackers* makes it clear that *cheese and crackers* represent one dish. In cases like this, clarity demands the Oxford comma.

### Rule 2

- Use a comma to separate two adjectives when the adjectives are interchangeable.

#### Example:

He is a strong, healthy man.

- We could also say *He is a healthy, strong man*.



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## Rule 3a

- When writers run two independent clauses together by using a comma, instead of a period, they create the dreaded **run-on sentence**, or more technically, a **comma splice**.

### Incorrect:

He walked all the way home, he shut the door.  
There are several simple solutions

### Correct:

He walked all the way home. He shut the door.  
After he walked all the way home, he shut the door.  
He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.

## Rule 3b

- In sentences where two independent clauses are joined by connectors such as *and*, *or*, *but*, *etc.*, put a comma at the end of the first clause.

### Incorrect

He walked all the way home and he shut the door.

### Correct

He walked all the way home, and he shut the door.



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**Note:** Some writers will omit the comma if the clauses are both quite short.

### Example:

I paint and he writes.

### Rule 3c

- If the subject does not appear in front of the second verb, a comma is generally unnecessary. (The subject is in bold and the verbs are italicized)

### Example:

**He** *thought* quickly but still *did not answer* correctly.

### Rule 4a

- Use a comma after certain words that introduce a sentence, such as *well, yes, why, hello, hey, etc.*

### Example:

Why, I can't believe this!

No, you can't have a dollar.



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## Rule 4b

- Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt the sentence flow (*nevertheless, after all, by the way, on the other hand, however, etc.*)

### Example:

I am, by the way, very nervous about this.

## Rule 5

- Use commas to set off the name, nickname, term of endearment, or title of a person directly addressed.

### Example:

Will you , Linda, do that assignment for me?

Yes, old friend, I will.

Good day, Captain.

## Rule 6

- Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year, and always put one after the year, also.

### Example:

It was in the *Sun*'s June 5, 2003, edition.



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**Note:** No comma is necessary for just the month and year.

### Example:

It was an article from June 2003.

### Rule 7

- Use a comma to separate a city from its state, and remember to put one after the state, also.

### Example:

I'm from the Denver, Colorado, area.

### Rule 8

- Traditionally, if a person's name is followed by *Sr.* or *Jr.*, a comma follows the last name: *Martin Luther King, Jr.* This comma is no longer considered mandatory. However, if a comma does precede *Sr.* or *Jr.*, another comma must follow the entire name when it appears midsentence.

### Incorrect

Al Mooney, Sr. is here.

### Correct

Al Mooney Sr. is here.

Al Mooney, Sr., is here.

### Rule 9

- Similarly, use commas to enclose degrees to titles used with names.



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## Example:

Al Mooney, M.D., is here.

## Rule 10

- When starting a sentence with a dependent clause, use a comma after it.

## Example:

If you are unsure about this, let me know.

**Note:** Often, it is unnecessary when the sentence starts with an independent clause and is followed by a dependent clause.

## Example:

Let me know if you are not sure about this.

## Rule 11

- Use commas to set off nonessential words, clauses, and phrases. These “nonessential” parts of the sentence, that occur midsentence, must be enclosed by commas. The closing comma is called an **appositive comma**.

## Incorrect

Jill who is my sister shut the door.

## Correct

Jill, who is my sister, shut the door.

## Incorrect

The man knowing **it** was late hurried home.



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## Correct

The man, knowing it was late, hurried home.

## Rule 12

- If something or someone is sufficiently identified, the description that follows is considered nonessential and should be surrounded by commas.

## Example:

Freddy, who has a limp, was in a car accident.

*If we already know which Freddy is meant, the description is not essential.*

The boy who has a limp was in a car accident.

*We do not know which boy is meant without further description; therefore, no commas are used.*

This leads to a persistent problem. Look at the following sentence:

My brother Bill is here.

- Now, see how adding two commas changes that sentence's meaning:

My brother, Bill, is here.

- Careful readers and writers understand that the first sentence means I have more than one brother. The commas in the second sentence mean that Bill is my only brother. In the first sentence, Bill is essential information: it identifies which of my two (or more) brothers I'm speaking of. This is why there are no commas to enclose Bill. In the second sentence, Bill is nonessential information, if he is my only brother.



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## Rule 13a

- Use commas to introduce **or** interrupt direct quotations.

### Example:

He said, “I don’t care.”

“Why,” I asked, “don’t you care?”

- This rule is optional with one-word quotations

### Example:

He said “Stop.”

## Rule 13b

- If the quotation comes before *he said, she wrote, they reported, Dana insisted,* or a similar attribution, end the quoted material with a comma, even if it only one word.

### Example:

“I don’t care,” he said.

“Stop,” he said.

## Rule 14

- Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.

### Example:

I can go, can’t I?



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## Rule 15

- Use a comma to separate contrasting parts of a sentence.

### Example:

That is my money, not yours.

## Rule 16a

- Use a comma before and after certain introductory words or terms, such as *namely*, *that is*, *i.e.*, *e.g.*, and *for instance*, when they are followed by a series of items.

### Example:

You may be required to bring many items, e.g., sleeping bags, pans, and warm clothing.

## Rule 16b

- Commas should precede the term *etc.* and enclose it if it is placed midsentence.

### Example:

Sleeping bags, pans, warm clothing, etc., are in the tent.

## Resources:

The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation by Jane Straus

