The Comma

Commas have started debates in newsrooms and offices for generations. Some questions of use are so fuzzy that reasonable people will disagree on whether a comma is needed. Still, in most cases, the use of commas is clear.

* Commas are used to separate items in a series. The AP Stylebook differs from most stylebooks in insisting that no comma is needed before the last item in a simple series. The flag is red, white and blue. However, a comma is needed if any item in a series contains more than one "and," as in: The menu offers sausages, ham and cabbage, and roast pork.

* Commas are used before the concluding conjunction in a complex series of phrases: The main points to consider are whether the athletes are skillful enough to compete, whether they have the stamina to endure training, and whether they have the proper mental attitude.

* Commas are combined with semicolons in complex series containing material that also must be set off by commas: He leaves a son, John Smith of Chicago; three daughters, Jane Smith of Wichita, Kan., Mary Smith of Denver, and Susan, wife of William Kingsbury of Boston; and a sister, Martha, wife of Robert Warren of Omaha, Neb.

* Commas are needed between evaluative (but not factual) adjectives. A general rule is to use a comma if it could be replaced by the word "and" or the adjectives could be reversed. The beautiful, inviting lake … gets a comma, but not The deep blue lake. …”

* Commas are used to set off "nonessential" clauses (with a subject and verb) and nonessential phrases:
  NONESSENTIAL CLAUSE: Reporters, who are fine people, should not be committing libel.
  NONESSENTIAL PHRASE: They ate dinner with their daughter, Julie. (Only one daughter.)

* Commas are NOT used in sentences that include essential clauses or phrases (those that are critical to the reader's understanding of what the author has in mind).
  ESSENTIAL CLAUSE: Reporters who work at this newspaper knew about the story first.
  ESSENTIAL PHRASE: They ate dinner with their daughter Julie. (More than one daughter.)

* Commas separate independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions are and, but, for, nor, or, yet and while. Thus, when one of these is used, a comma is necessary, as in She decided to apply for the loan, but she was sure she would be turned down. As a general rule, use a comma if the subject of each clause is expressly stated, as in the above example.

* Commas set off long introductory phrases and dependent clauses. While a short phrase at the start of a sentence does not need to be set off with a comma, such as At midnight the auction will begin, a long phrase does, as in: After three weeks of using the product, consumers reported many benefits. For consistency, some publications require a comma after any introductory material.

* Commas set off age and address from a person's name. For example: Patrick McNamara, 42, was promoted today. Also: Jennifer Katz, 1411 Toad Road, was promoted today.

* Commas help clarify confusing material. When material could be otherwise misread, separate with a comma, as in: What the problem is, is certain to become clear soon. (Better yet, rewrite such a sentence.)

* Commas are used to separate cities from states, and cities from nations: His journey will take him from Dublin, Ireland, to Fargo, N.D., and back. Also: The Selma, Ala., group met with the governor.

* Commas are used in numbers over 999. Exceptions are numbers that are street addresses, broadcast frequencies, room numbers, serial numbers, telephone numbers, years and trade names that do not include a comma.
* Commas are used around states and dates.
   When a city is followed by a state, use commas around the state:
   
   Flight schedules at the airport in Missoula, Mont., also are going to change.

   When the year follows a month and day, use commas around the year:
   
   The company was founded on May 16, 1968, and did not turn a profit until 1979.

   However, when the specific day is not present, do not use a comma to separate the month and year:
   
   The August 2001 peace accords failed to end the hostilities.

* Commas separate attribution from quotes.
  A comma is used to set off attribution when a complete sentence of a direct quote follows:
  
  He said, "I promise to turn the company around."

  No comma is needed if the quote is not a complete sentence:
  
  He said he would "turn the company around."

  A comma is used before attribution that follows a complete sentence of direct or paraphrased quote:
  
  "I promise to turn the company around," he said.
  He would turn the company around, he said.

  However, use a colon instead of a comma to introduce quotations of more than one sentence:
  
  He said: "I promise to turn the company around. I expect it will take longer than many people want, but I know the turn-around will happen. If you have any doubt, look at my record."

* Commas are used to set off conjunctive adverbs (however, moreover, nevertheless, therefore) and other transitional expressions (as a result, to sum up, etc.).

* Commas are used to separate a name and an occupation, but not a name and a title. For example, a comma is required in: John Jones, Fairchild Corp. president, is expected to attend, and also in, John Jones, president of the Fairchild Corp., is expected to attend.

  But there is no comma in Fairchild Corp. president John Jones is expected to attend.

* Commas are used to set off parenthetical expressions: The ozone depletion may, scientists believe, start getting better in a few years.

* Commas are used to set off contrasted elements: The older I get, the less I understand the new music.

* Commas (and periods) always go inside quotation marks in American writing.

* Commas are NOT used to separate the subject from the verb in a sentence.
  
  WRONG: Hundreds of people wearing Halloween costumes, lined up outside the store.

* Commas are NOT used to separate two verbs that are ruled by the same subject, or two objects ruled by the same verb:

  WRONG: My boss drew up plans for reorganization, and left on a long vacation.

  WRONG: The mayor praised the high school students, and the members of the PTA.