Commas with Introductory Elements

Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: X When you called Tom was listening on the phone.

SAMPLE 2: X Under my air mattress, was a large rock.

What's the Problem?

In formal writing, an introductory element is usually set off from the subject-the beginning part of the main sentence-with a comma. The comma tells the reader where the introductory element ends and the subject begins. Even when the introductory element is short, the comma can prevent the reader from being confused about where the introductory element ends and the subject begins. For example, in Sample 1, the introductory element when you called is short, but without the comma, the reader might think that the introductory element is when you called Tom. Sometimes part of the main sentence is put in an inverted order for emphasis. In this case, a comma should not be used. This is the error in Sample 2.

What Causes the Problem?

There are two separate problems with introductory elements. The most common problem is not using a required comma with an introductory element. In part, this problem results from the fact that there are several different types of introductory elements; some require commas but others do not, or the use of a comma is optional.

The second, less common problem is using a comma with what is called an inverted sentence. Inverted sentences flip the last part of the sentence to the front for emphasis: the subject has been moved to follow the verb, and the part that would normally follow the verb has been put first.

The punctuation problem inverted sentences pose is that they can look like sentences with introductory elements, and writers mistakenly use commas with them.

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct comma errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

To change a baby's diaper, follow these simple steps. First lay the baby on a flat surface. If the surface is off the ground use safety straps to secure the baby. Unfasten the tapes, and remove the soiled diaper. To clean the diaper area use a wet cloth or a disposable "baby wipe" product. (To avoid an unexpected spray or puddle you may want to cover the diaper area immediately.) While gently holding the baby's ankles with one hand use your other hand to slip the back part of the diaper under him or her. Bring the front part of the diaper between the baby's legs, and fasten it on each side using the adhesive tapes. (5)

Changing a diaper is a fairly mechanical process. However the process often causes great anxiety for new parents and nonparents. (1)

Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

Here are examples of the types of introductory elements that always require commas:

However, you can go if you want to.
(Transitional term)

Smiling broadly, she closed her book.
(Participial phrase)

To open the door, you'll need a key.
While checking my notes, I found a major error.

The following types of introductory elements normally require commas unless they are short and not confusing:

- After dinner is over, let's go to a movie.
- In the evenings after dinner, we would go for walks.

Commas with single-word adverbs are optional:

- Soon it began to rain.

The first step in correctly punctuating introductory elements is locating them. Use this tip to locate introductory elements:

**DELETION TIP:** Delete any suspected introductory element. If what remains is a complete sentence, what you deleted is an introductory element.

Here is the tip applied to the error in Sample 1:

**SAMPLE 1:**  
When you called Tom was listening on the phone.

**TIP APPLIED:** Tom was listening on the phone.

The tip helps to determine that *When you called* is an introductory element since what is left is a complete sentence.

Because all introductory elements can be set off with a comma, the following tip always works:

**COMMAS WITH INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS TIP:** Use commas after all introductory elements.

**CORRECTION:** When you called, Tom was listening on the phone.

The Deletion Tip will also help you identify inverted sentences. If what remains is not a complete sentence, then the introductory word group should not be set off with a comma. Here is the tip applied to the second sample error:

**SAMPLE 2:**  
Under my air mattress, was a large rock.

**TIP APPLIED:** Under my air mattress was a large rock.

The Deletion Tip shows that was a large rock is not an introductory element and thus should not be set off with a comma.

**CORRECTION:** Under my air mattress was a large rock.

**Sentence Practice 1**

Correct the following sentences. Confirm your answers by applying the Deletion Tip.

**EXAMPLE:** When we got the test back nobody even thought about sleeping.

**ANSWER:** When we got the test back, nobody even thought about sleeping.

**CONFIRMATION:** Nobody even thought about sleeping.

1. In France shepherds once carried portable wooden sundials as pocket watches.
2. During our history test somebody actually fell asleep.
3. Into the war zone, marched the weary troops.
4. Reluctantly I agreed to the proposal.
5. Each time they call I seem to be out of the house.
Correct the following sentences. Confirm your answer by applying the Deletion Tip.

**EXAMPLE:**  
According to a recent study more women than men take Oreo cookies apart to eat the middle.

**ANSWER:**  
According to a recent study, more women than men take Oreo cookies apart to eat the middle.

**CONFIRMATION:**  
More women than men take Oreo cookies apart to eat the middle.

1. When opening champagne always keep the bottle pointed away from you.

2. Furthermore I have never even been in Chicago.