

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.