

COMMAS: What You Need to Know to Use Commas Appropriately

The comma, like other points of punctuation, is a powerful tool that sophisticated writers use in their efforts to communicate their ideas as clearly and precisely as possible. To other writers, however, comma usage is a great mystery. This sense of mystery may be reinforced by the typical handbook presentation of commas—pages of rules followed by a number of exceptions.

This handout takes another approach. Here we offer you a few basic principles that explain how the comma works, along with a discussion and illustrations of common applications of these principles. You should, therefore, go through this handout with the objective of understanding these basic principles. In mastering comma use, your objective should be not simply to avoid errors, but rather to appreciate how this point of punctuation can reinforce the meanings you want convey in the sentences you write.

Perhaps the best way to dispel the mystery of the comma is to begin with constructions that most writers punctuate correctly.

UNPUNCTUATED:

This event occurred on October 20 2000.

To make this dish you will need tomatoes onions eggs and basil.

His integrity simplicity and humility won the hearts of his followers.

PUNCTUATED:

This event occurred on October 20, 2000.

To make this dish you will need tomatoes, onions, eggs, and basil.

His integrity, simplicity, and humility won the hearts of his followers.

When you compare the punctuated with the unpunctuated versions of these statements, you should notice two central factors about commas:

- (1) A comma is a VISUAL sign or signal;
- (2) The message or signal the comma sends is "separate."

COMMAS SEPARATE GRAMMATICAL UNITS

To understand the final and most important factor affecting comma use, let's represent two of the earlier examples grammatically.

you	will need	tomatoes onions eggs basil
[subject]	[verb]	[objects]

integrity simplicity humility	won	hearts
[subjects]	[verb]	[object]

Now let's consider two more examples:

...government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address"

government	of the people by the people for the people	shall not perish
[subject]	[adjectives]	[verb]

The professor explained who Ulysses S. Grant was, what role he played in the Civil War, and why he was such a great general.

professor	explained	who Ulysses S. Grant was what role he played in the Civil War why he was such a great general
[subject]	[verb]	[objects]

These examples show us that, although the comma may seem to be a small and humble object, it has a critical role to play. That role is enabling readers to grasp the proper structure of a sentence quickly and easily. In these examples of items in a series:

- The commas alert us that one of the grammatical units in the sentence is a compound: that is, the unit is composed of several ideas.
- The comma indicates the boundaries of the compound elements.

NOTE: When a series includes *and* (or another coordinating conjunction), a comma is not required after the penultimate in the series:

. . . tomatoes, onions, eggs[,] and basil.

Some writers, however, prefer to put a comma here. Either use is correct. The "rule" is to follow the same style throughout a paper.

WHEN, HOW, AND WHY TO USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE OR SET OFF GRAMMATICAL UNITS

Up to this point we have been considering compound grammatical structures. The units we have separated with commas are a series of ideas that play the same grammatical role (fulfill the same grammatical function) in a sentence.

To complete our understanding of appropriate comma use, let's consider some perverse uses of commas:

He went to, the store.

Sally, loves Mike.

The old, tree was cut down after, the arborist declared it dead.

These uses of the comma should strike you as perverse because the commas here are separating grammatical units that are units of meaning: in other words, they are elements that want and need to be together in order to create meaning.

To put it negatively:

You never want to separate or set off grammatical elements that belong together and/or that are essential to the meaning you intend the sentence to communicate.

To put it positively:

commas allow you to exploit the potentials of structuring sentences in English because they enable readers to grasp, easily and quickly, the grammatical structure you are using.

Specifically,

- Commas allow you to signal inversions of the natural grammatical pattern of a sentence.
- Commas allow you to signal and set off grammatical elements that "interrupt" the natural S-V-O progression of a clause.
- Commas allow you to set off ideas that are not essential to the core idea the sentence is intended to convey.

INVERSIONS

To see how these principles work, let's start with a sentence in its natural, right-branching order:

Alice sat down wearily to watch television after she cleaned up the kitchen and tucked her five children in for the night.

Alice sat down wearily to watch television after she cleaned up the kitchen and tucked her five children in for the night.

The *after* clause (underlined), because it functions as an adverb, can move around in this sentence. We can, for example, shift it to the beginning of the sentence. Since this clause is pretty long, we'll put a comma at its end to signal readers that the introductory subordinate element is complete, and that the sentence now moves on to the main clause.

After she cleaned up the kitchen and tucked her five children in for the night, Alice sat down wearily to watch television.

INTERRUPTERS

Other inversions of the natural grammatical order may interrupt the normal progression of the S-V-O of a clause. Since S-V-O form a unit of elements that belong together, we'll put commas at the beginning and end of an interrupter to signal that we are interrupting the S-V-O unit.

Natural order:

She told us that Alfred's meatloaf was the best in town.

Inversion as interrupter:

Unpunctuated inversion:

Alfred's meatloaf she told us was the best in town.

Set off with commas:

Alfred's meatloaf, she told us, was the best in town.

Alfred's meatloaf she told us → was the best in town.

The unpunctuated version is included here to illustrate the confusion our brains experience when we reach the word *she*. By comparison, the pair of commas isolate and set off this

interrupter as a unit, allowing our brains to process the sentence in the way visually represented above.

Here's another example of an inversion as an interrupter:

Natural order:

Most critics contend that Hedwig is a tragic figure in this version of the legend.

Inversion as interrupter:

Most critics contend that, in this version of the legend, Hedwig is a tragic figure.

We may also introduce adverbs into a sentence that interrupt the natural progression of a sentence. Again, to signal such an interruption, such words or phrases are often set off with commas:

He was not, *however*, skilled enough to execute that dive well.

She was, *indeed*, very beautiful.

Hannah will, *sooner or later*, realize what a mistake she made.

He argued, *first*, that use of bicycles on campus should be encouraged.

I will show that, *in fact*, the defendant was on the other side of town.

We are now ready to tackle and understand constructions that are most problematic for writers and thus where errors in comma usage are most likely to occur.

RESTRICTIVE AND NONRESTRICTIVE GRAMMATICAL ELEMENTS

By this point in our discussion it should be obvious that, if you expect to use commas (or any punctuation, for that matter) appropriately, you need to have a feel for the grammar of a sentence. Keeping in mind two basic notions should help you out here:

- Terms like *subject*, *verb*, *object*, *adjective*, *adverb* refer to FUNCTIONS within a sentence. Words filling these grammatical "slots" in a sentence are playing a particular role.
- Any of these functional "slots" can be filled by one word or by a group of words (either a phrase or a clause).

Restrictive or nonrestrictive elements may be adjectives, adverbs, or appositives. All three have essentially the same purpose or function: to specify or to say something more about a noun or the meaning expressed in the sentence.

My friend Rachel is graduating on Saturday.
 appositive:
 a noun (Rachel) specifying another noun (friend)

The novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald are brilliant.
 adjective:
 specifying which novels

He flunked the test, probably because he didn't bother to study for it.
 adverb:
 says something more specific about the idea in the main clause

Adverbs, adjectives, appositives may be restrictive or nonrestrictive.

A restrictive modifier is one that expresses something essential to the meaning being expressed in the sentence as a whole. To leave out this idea would be to change the meaning of the sentence. It should be obvious at this point that we do NOT separate these modifiers from the words they restrict.

A nonrestrictive modifier is one that adds information to a sentence. Leaving it out does not change the meaning communicated by the sentence as a whole. Writers signal nonrestrictive modifiers by setting them off with commas.

The easiest and quickest way to determine if a modifier is restrictive or nonrestrictive is to remove it from the sentence and ask if the idea is the same:

The novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald are brilliant.
 Are you saying: novels are brilliant? No. The statement is restricted to novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

My son will not be allowed to drive unless he has an adult with him in the car.
 Are you saying: My son will not be allowed to drive? No. He is allowed to drive as long as the condition explicitly stated here is met.

My father, who is planning to retire next year, is an avid skier.
 Are you saying: My father is an avid skier? Yes. The information about retirement does not affect the statement about your father's interest in skiing.

In some sentences the meaning conveyed by the main clause of the sentence and by a particular modifier makes it pretty obvious if a modifier is restrictive or non-restrictive. This is the reason that your teachers are able to "correct" errors.

You should be aware, however, that it is the writer who determines whether a modifier is restrictive or nonrestrictive, and punctuates accordingly, so the reader reads the sentence appropriately.

For example:

Junior flunked his chem test because he didn't study.

Junior flunked his chem test, probably because he didn't study.

These two sentences carry different messages. The writer of the first sentence is informing us of the reason that Junior flunked the chem test. The comma in the second sentence lets us know that the *because* clause is a nonrestrictive one. It could be left out without changing the message of the main clause. The message of the sentence, therefore, is simply that Junior did not pass the test.

Let's see how well you are understanding restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers.

QUIZ (answers in footnotes)

Which of these sentences tells us that you have more than one brother?¹

- (1) My brother Tom plays the guitar.
- (2) My brother, Tom, plays the guitar.

Which of these sentences tells us that the doctors did not treat villagers who suffered from yellow fever or beriberi?²

- (1) The doctors treated the villagers who were suffering from malaria.
- (2) The doctors treated the villagers, who were suffering from malaria.

At the 1984 Republican convention the platform committee had a heated discussion over which of the following sentences should go into the party's platform! Which of these sentences was the choice of the strict conservatives?³

- (1) We therefore oppose any attempt to increase taxes, which would harm the economy and reverse the trend toward restoring control of the economy to individual Americans.
- (2) We therefore oppose any attempt to increase taxes which would harm the economy and reverse the trend toward restoring control of the economy to individual Americans.

¹ The answer is (1). Unless you provide the name of which brother, your statement will not really communicate what you want to tell us.

² The answer is (1). The action of treating is restricted to those particular villagers who had malaria.

³ The answer is (1). Conservatives are opposed to any and all sorts of taxes. The *which* clause simply explains their general opposition.

DELAYED MODIFIERS

This particular use of the comma pertains to the basic rule governing adjectives. Adjectives will modify the nouns they are closest to and thus should be placed immediately next to the nouns they modify. English, however, allows for a construction we call a delayed modifier.

The child walked along, humming tunelessly.

The underlined verbal phrase is an adjective that tells us something more about the child. Here it is "delayed" because it comes after the verb phrase. The same idea could be expressed as follows, placing the adjectival phrase in its more normal position(s).

Humming tunelessly, the child walked along.

The child, humming tunelessly, walked along.

Placing a comma immediately before a delayed modifier separates it from the grammatical elements that precede it. The importance and role of the comma becomes obvious in this next set of examples.

Dick ran for the cab weaving in and out of traffic.

Dick ran for the cab, weaving in and out of traffic.

Dick ran for the cab weaving in and out of traffic.

Dick ran for the cab, weaving in and out of traffic.

In the first sentence, *weaving in and out of traffic* describes the cab. Of course, Dick could be engaging in the same behavior. Separating the phrase from the noun *cab* with a comma tells us that *weaving in and out of traffic* is a delayed modifier, telling us something more about Dick. We could also write:

Dick, weaving in and out of traffic, ran for the cab.

IN SUM

More could be said about commas, but if you remember, and put into practice, the three basic principles we've introduced here, comma use should be much less mysterious.

- (1) A comma is a VISUAL sign or signal;
- (2) The message or signal the comma sends is "separate."
- (3) Never separate or set off grammatical elements that belong together and/or that are essential to the meaning you intend the sentence to communicate. Conversely, do use commas to separate or set off elements when and if such they will allow readers to grasp a sentence's structure more easily and quickly.