

The Common Comma: Where Do They Go?

Commas are a common punctuation mark, but sometimes they are improperly used or nonexistent. The rules seem to have relaxed a little, but here are nineteen reasons to insert a comma:

1. To separate the coordinate clauses in a compound sentence:

He should exercise more, *but* he has a bad back.

However, if there is no coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor*), omit the comma and use a semicolon or period instead so you don't get a comma splice or run-on sentence:

Please fill out these forms, I need them today.

Please fill out these forms; I need them today.

Please fill out these forms. I need them today

2. Between words, phrases, and clauses if there are three or more, unless joined by *and* or *or*:

I played the guitar Jane played the drums and Mary played the keyboard.

I played the guitar, Jane played the drums, and Mary played the keyboard.

I played the guitar and Jane played the drums and Mary played the keyboard.

3. To set off phrases and clauses that come before the main clause of a sentence:
Even though the sun was out, the wind ruined the picnic.

4. To set off phrases, clauses, and appositives that aren't essential:

Jane, *the best swimmer*, won the first place trophy. (You could say *Jane won the first place trophy.*)

Mr. Bowman, *the first CEO of our company*, will be in attendance.

5. To set off coordinate phrases that modify the same noun:

Her dog is as tall as, *but not as fat as*, mine is.

6. When two consecutive adjectives modify the same noun:

We need a *dependable, outgoing* person.

To help decide if there should be a comma, make the adjectives into a relative clause after the noun with *and* in between:

He wore an old, moth-eaten jacket: His jacket is old and moth-eaten—use a comma

She broke through the management glass ceiling: She broke the management glass and ceiling—no comma. The adjectives are one unit “management glass ceiling”

7. Between parts of a sentence that suggest comparison or contrast:

The more you work now, the less you'll have to do later.

8. To indicate omission of a word:
The tulips were blooming; the birds were singing; and the *sun, shining*.
9. To separate identical or similar words:
Whatever is, is.
10. To separate words and clarify the meaning of a sentence:
Right after the road was washed out by the water
Right after, the road was washed out by the water.
For a newbie like Ann Jordan is seemingly out of control
For a newbie like Ann, Jordan is seemingly out of control.
11. To set off words that introduce a sentence and come before the subject and verb of the main clause:
Oh, I can't do that!
Yes, you can.
Before we can vote, we need candidates and a ballot.

However, if the introduction is the subject of the sentence, don't use a comma:
Whichever path you take is up to you.
12. To set off words that suggest a break in thought with words such as *however, namely, of course*:
My printer ran out of ink, of course, when I was printing my final paper.
13. To set off the name of a person who is being addressed:
Thank you, John.
14. To set off a quotation from the rest of the sentence:
"I'll see you later," said Jane.
15. After the salutation of an informal letter and the close of any letter:
Dear Grandma,
Best wishes,
16. Before any title or its abbreviation that follows a person's name:
John Smith, President
Jane Jones, M.D.

But not with Jr., Sr., or II:
John Jones Jr.
Barry Dewey III
17. To separate the parts of a date, an address, or a geographic location:
January 1, 1940

1234 Main Street, Los Angeles, California
Pike's Market is in Seattle, Washington

18. To set off groups of digits in numbers:

1,120

23,876

304,678

19. To separate unrelated numbers in a sentence:

In May 2011, 15,000 students graduated from the university.

The common comma can cause confusion in usage. However, these simple rules should set you on the right path and have you placing commas where they rightfully belong.