

# Commas: “For the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed”

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*“If you bend a branch until it’s horizontal, the sap will slow to a stopping point: a comma or colon, made of leaves grown into one another and over one another and hardened. Out of this pause comes a flower, which unfolds itself in spirals, as if the leaf form, unable to keep to its line, had begun to pivot.” ~Alice Oswald*

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As I was proofreading my book, I had this growing sense that I was not satisfied with my competence of comma usage, so I gathered some sources and compiled a list of occasions when commas are called for (and sometimes when they are not). I read Elizabeth Gordon’s *The New Well-Tempered Sentence* and June Casagrande’s *The Best Punctuation Book, Period* to research the content of this post. This list, unfortunately, is not exhaustive, but it is extensive.

## Independent Clauses

### Short Independent Clauses

Short independent clauses joined by *and* can be used without a comma.

### Short, Successive Independent Clauses

Commas may be used between short, successive independent clauses that are equal in value. These clauses should not have commas within them.

### Coordinating & Correlative Conjunctions

Use a comma between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating or correlative conjunction. Place the comma before the conjunction. For correlative conjunctions, the comma is positioned before the second correlative conjunction.

### So That

Do not use a comma before the subordinating conjunction *so that*. Sometimes this subordinating conjunction is rendered as *so* while omitting *that*, which is then only implied.

## Semicolons

Use a semicolon between two independent clauses if you want to combine them into a single sentence without a comma and a conjunction.

## Conjunctive Adverbs

When two independent clauses are joined by a conjunctive adverb, a semicolon precedes the conjunctive adverb, and a comma follows it.

## Relative Dependent Clauses

### Restrictive Relative Clauses

Do not use commas to set off restrictive relative clauses. A restrictive clause is essential to the meaning of the clause that it modifies.

### Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses

Use commas to set off nonrestrictive relative clauses. A nonrestrictive clause is nonessential or parenthetical to the meaning of the clause that it modifies.

## Adverbial Dependent Clauses

### Introductory Adverbial Dependent Clauses

An adverbial dependent clause that precedes the main clause is usually set off by a comma whether it is restrictive or nonrestrictive.

### Short Introductory Adverbial Dependent Clauses

If a short adverbial dependent clause precedes a main clause and the sentence is clear, the comma may be omitted.

### Mid-Sentence Adverbial Dependent Clauses

Commas are placed before and after adverbial phrases or adverbial dependent clauses that occur in the middle of a sentence between the subject and the verb.

### Contrastive Adverbial Dependent Clauses

In cases of extreme contrast, use a comma before an adverbial dependent clause that follows its main clause.

## Restrictive Adverbial Dependent Clauses

A restrictive adverbial dependent clause that follows a main clause should not be set off by a comma.

## Nonrestrictive Adverbial Dependent Clauses

A nonrestrictive adverbial dependent clause that follows a main clause is preceded by a comma.

## Adverbial Phrases

### Introductory Adverbial Phrases

Adverbial phrases at the beginning of sentences are often followed by a comma.

### Short Introductory Adverbial Phrases

A comma is sometimes omitted after a short introductory adverbial phrase. (Short phrases are less than four words.) A comma is not used after an introductory adverbial phrase immediately preceding the verb it modifies.

### Mid-Sentence Adverbial Phrases

Commas are placed before and after adverbial phrases or adverbial dependent clauses that occur in the middle of a sentence between the subject and the verb.

### Pre- or Post-verb Modification

Adverbs or adverbial phrases (e.g., adverbial prepositional phrases) inserted before or after the structure they modify may or may not be set off with commas.

## Participial & Infinitival Phrases

Introductory participial and infinitival phrases are set off by a comma, except when they immediately precede a verb or subject that they are a part of.

## Adjectives

### Coordinate Adjectives

Coordinate adjectives are separated by a comma. Adjectives are coordinated if they modify the same element and their positions can be reversed without altering the meaning (i.e., they are of equal rank). In this case, a comma is a substitute for *and*.

## Cumulative Adjectives

Cumulative adjectives are not separated by a comma because they build upon each other, and their order cannot be reversed.

## Post-noun Modification

Adjectives inserted directly after the nouns they modify may or may not be set off with commas.

## Absolute Phrases

Use commas separate absolute phrases from the rest of the sentence.

## Appositives

If an appositive is restrictive, do not set it off with commas. If it is restrictive, omit the commas. For proper names, omit commas in an appositive that is a proper name.

## Parenthetical Clauses, Phrases, Words

Use a comma to separate a parenthetical (i.e., nonrestrictive or nonessential) element from the rest of a sentence. For parenthetical elements that are less logically related to the rest of the sentence, use em dashes or parentheses.

## Complementary & Antithetical Phrases

Use commas to separate complementary or antithetical phrases. And set off those phrases from the rest of the sentence with commas.

E.g.: *Your conclusions lead me away from, rather than toward, what you want me to think.*

## Antithetical Phrases & Clauses

Use commas to separate antithetical phrases and clauses beginning with *not* if those clauses and phrases are unessential to the sentence.

## Short Antithetical Phrases

Do not use a comma to separate short antithetical phrases.

E.g.: *The sooner the better.*

## Interdependent Antithetical Clauses

Separate interdependent antithetical clauses with commas.

E.g.: *The lower she sank, the better she felt.*

## Quotations, Proverbs, Maxims

Use commas to set off quotations, proverbs, maxims, or similar expressions either at the beginning, middle, or end of sentences.

### Subject, Predicate Nominative, Restrictive Appositive

If a quotation, proverb, or maxim is the subject, predicate nominative, or restrictive appositive, do not use commas.

### Flow

If a quotation flows into or integrates well with the sentence, do not use commas to set it off.

## Quotation Marks, Parentheses, Brackets

### Commas

Use commas to separate a quotation from other parts of a sentence.

- When a quotation is preceded by an attribution (e.g., *he said*), the comma is placed immediately before the quotation marks.
- When a quotation is followed by an attribution, a comma is placed inside the closing quotation mark.
- When a quotation is followed by an attribution that ends in a question or exclamation mark, do not use a comma after the question or exclamation mark.
- A comma goes inside the quotation marks but outside the parentheses or brackets in quoted material.

### Colons

Use a colon before a quotation to add emphasis.

## Items in a Series

Use a comma to separate three or more items in a series: words, phrases, or clauses.

- Try to make each item parallel in structure.
- Do not use commas between items that are considered a whole.
- If each item in a series is joined by a conjunction, do not use a comma.
- The last item in a series of words, phrases, or clauses is often preceded by the coordinating conjunction *and*. Use a comma before *and*.
- When the last or second-to-last item in a series contains its own conjunction, use the Oxford comma.
- Do not use a comma before an ampersand.
- When items within a series contain their own commas, use a semicolon to separate each item in the series.
- When each item in a series is long, you may use semicolons instead to separate the items.

## Confirmatory Questions

Use a comma before a confirmatory question that occurs in a declarative sentence.

## Direct Address

Use a comma to set off nouns of direct address.

## Bits & Pieces

### Vocative O

Do not use a comma to set off the vocative *O*.

### The Interjection Oh

Use a comma to set off the exclamatory *oh*.

### Interjections, Transitional/Sentence Adverbs

Use commas to set off interjections, transitional/sentence adverbs.

## Continuity

Expressions like *in fact*, *perhaps*, and *therefore* are sometimes set off by commas, but if expressions do not break the flow or a pause is not needed, the commas can be omitted.

## That is, e.g., i.e., etc., Specifically, Namely, Respectively

Use a comma to set off these phrases when they introduce a series or an example.

### Including, Such as

Using a comma before these terms is optional, but do not use it after them.

## Mistaken Junctions

Use a comma between elements to prevent ambiguity.

E.g.: “*Shortly after, the convocation commenced its pompous tones and hollow notes.*”

## Similar Words

Use commas to separate words that are similar in spelling or sound.

E.g.: “*Whatever happens, happens because it must.*”

## Omitting Words

Use a comma to indicate words that have been omitted from a context in which the omitted words are readily understood.

E.g.: *The farmer takes a wife; the wife, a child; the child, a dog; the dog, another child; the other child, another dog; the other dog, a pet rabbit to chase.*

## Unrelated Numbers

Use a comma to separate numbers that are unrelated to avoid ambiguity.

E.g.: *In 1905, 763 mustaches were shaved off in a county in Massachusetts alone.*

## Place of Residence or Origin

When a phrase indicating a person’s residence or origin is used beside a person’s name, you may omit the comma, especially with historical figures whose origin is regularly stated with their name.

## Person's Name, Title, or Position

Words and phrases that identify a person's title or position are separated from the person's name by commas; this may be viewed as an appositive.

### Family Names

Avoid using commas before roman numerals in family names; *Jr.* and *Sr.* may go with or without commas around them.

## Addresses

Use commas to separate parts of addresses and names of geographical places.

## Dates

Using a comma between a month and year in a date is optional, but use commas to separate the year when it is followed by the day of the month.

## Letters

Use a comma after a salutation in an informal letter, and use a comma after a complimentary close in a letter.

### Greetings

*Dear* in *Dear Jane*, is an adjective and is part of the direct address, unlike *Hey, John*.

## Digits

With numerical values over 999, use a comma after every third digit.

## Inverted Names & Phrases

Use commas to separate inverted names and phrases, such as in a bibliography or index.