

Main Uses of Commas

1. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.

- **Coordinating conjunctions:** FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So)
- **Independent clauses:** clauses that can stand alone as complete sentences
 - *Examples:*
 - I always do my best, but my sergeant yells at me anyway.
 - Upperclassmen have been through the fourth class system, so they ask knobs to do what they had to do.
 - *Incorrect:* Alisa brought the injured bird home, and fashioned a splint out of popsicle sticks for its wing. (The underlined part of the sentence is a dependent clause and cannot stand on its own, so no comma is necessary.)

2. Use a comma after an introductory word, clause, or phrase.

- The comma tells the reader the introductory clause or phrase is ending, and the main part of the sentence is beginning.
 - *Examples:*
 - When I returned to the barracks, the upperclassmen were waiting for me.
 - First, our cadre corporal led us to the barber shop for our new haircuts.
- **Note:** Prepositional phrases of three words or less are not followed by a comma.
 - *Example:* After breakfast we hiked.

3. Use commas to set off nonrestrictive elements in a sentence. Do not use commas to set off restrictive elements.

- **Nonrestrictive:** describes a noun or pronoun whose meaning has already been defined. Removing the phrase will not dramatically change the meaning of the sentence.
 - *Example:* The dessert, made with fresh raspberries, was delicious.
 - The phrase in bold simply adds some information about a specific dessert.
- **Restrictive:** defines or limits the meaning of the word it describes and removing it will significantly change the meaning of the sentence.
 - *Example:*
 - The dessert made with fresh raspberries was delicious.
 - This time, the same phrase does not have commas around it, so it tells readers which of two desserts the writer is referring to.
 - *More examples:*
 - Ed's house, which is located on thirteen acres, was completely furnished with bats in the rafters. (Nonrestrictive)
 - Ramona's cat that just had kittens became defensive of the other cats in the house. (Restrictive)
 - Darwin's most important book, On the Origin of the Species, was the result of many years of research. (Nonrestrictive)
 - The song "Vertigo" was blasted out of huge amplifiers at the concert. (Restrictive)

4. Use a comma between all items in a series.

When three or more items are presented in a series, those items should be separated with commas.

- *Examples:*
 - I bought books, notepads, and pens for the upcoming semester.
 - My English professor is a kind, funny, intelligent man.

CAUTION! BEWARE OF COMMA SPLICES!

A comma splice occurs when one joins two complete sentences with a comma instead of a period or a semicolon.

- *Example:* The city had one public swimming pool, it stayed packed with children all summer long.
 - The clauses before and after the underlined comma are both complete sentences that can stand alone. There are several ways to correct this error:
 - Replace the comma with a period and make two separate sentences:
The city had one public swimming pool. It stayed packed with children all summer long.
 - Replace the comma with a semicolon:
The city had one public swimming pool; it stayed packed with children all summer long.
 - Insert a coordinating conjunction:
The city had one public swimming pool,so it stayed packed with children all summer long.