

COMMAS

Placement of commas affects sentence rhythm since they indicate a pause. Not all grammar guides agree on every “rule,” and in some cases comma use is a matter of preference. The explanations and exercises that follow, however, will introduce you to the most common rules and help develop an intuitive sense of comma placement and how it affects sentence rhythm.

Note: Use your judgment and sense of rhythm to place a comma when necessary to avoid confusion or misreading. However, use this approach sparingly. When in doubt, leave the comma out.

FANBOYS (FOR, AND, NOR, BUT, OR, YET, SO) COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

Recall that when two independent sentences are joined by a FANBOYS conjunction, a comma should be placed before the conjunction. (See “Run-ons” lesson.)

Incorrect: Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls yet toy companies continue to market these products without restraint.

The conjunction here is “yet.” Look at what comes before “yet.” Is “Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls” a complete sentence? Yes. Now look at what comes after “yet.” Is “Toy companies continue to market these products without restraint” a complete sentence? Yes. There are two independence sentences joined by a FANBOYS conjunction; therefore, place a comma before “yet.”

Correct: Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls, yet toy companies continue to market these products without restraint.

DEPENDENT CLAUSES

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, use a comma to separate it from the independent clause (the rest of the sentence). A dependent clause is part of a sentence that relies on another part of a sentence for its meaning.

The words in the table are common indicators of a dependent clause:

If	Whenever	Before	Until
Unless	When	Although	Whatever
As	After	Since	While

Notice how dependent clause words make a sentence need more information to complete a thought.

Example: If you come over today, I will make you cookies.

Notice how “If you come over today” needs the independent clause (a clause that can stand alone), “I will make you cookies.” A dependent clause is not a full sentence on its own, but instead it works with an independent clause to form a sentence. Remember that a comma is placed between the dependent clause and the independent clause.

Incorrect: When it is hot outside I like to eat ice cream.

Correct: When it is hot outside, I like to eat ice cream.

INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Place a comma after a word or expression that introduces a sentence. These words usually indicate a transition or provide commentary on the sentence that follows. Here are some common introductory words.

Finally, the check arrived in the mail.

Unfortunately, it is not what you know but who you know.

Luckily, we won't be going through that whitewater again.

Of course, not everyone enjoys the sensation of jumping out of an airplane.

However, do not get too comfortable with your present situation.

In the end, doing a job imperfectly is better than never trying at all.

First, you should understand the costs involved in starting a business.

Second, you must decide whether you are willing to pay that price.

Next, draft a business plan and let someone review it for potential problems.

Also, don't forget to apply for a business license.

In contrast, those who study and pay attention in class usually do well on exams.

For example, one student who stopped text-messaging in class improved by one letter grade.

In the meantime, he was able to catch up on the meaningless conversations after class.

The above words only require a comma when they are functioning as introductory words. Sometimes they function as core parts of a sentence; in these cases, they will not require a comma. You must decide whether the word is functioning as an introductory word or as a core part of the sentence.

Next in line to be CEO is our former coworker Sally Brown. (not an introductory word)

Next, press the gas pedal to the floor and hold on for your life. (introductory word)

Of course I love you. (not an introductory expression)

Of course, not everyone needs to be given so much reassurance. (introductory expression)

INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

Place a comma after a phrase that introduces or leads into the main part of a sentence. This rule applies in a way similar to the dependent clause rule.

Examples:

Kissing in the display window, the couple drew quite a crowd.

Of all the candidates running for office, he was my least favorite.

Wanting to make an impression, I rented a convertible for my first date.

With that in mind, we can move forward with the proposal.

FOLLOW-UP ELEMENTS

Place a comma before a word or phrase at the end of a sentence that serves as an afterthought. Sometimes these afterthoughts are short follow-up questions.

Examples:

It is the first house on the left, I believe.

I love getting gifts for Valentine's Day, especially jewelry.

The house was quiet, almost too quiet.

ITEMS IN A SERIES

Use a comma to separate three or more items in a series. These items can be single words or whole phrases.

My high school buddies and I went to France, Spain, and Italy after we graduated.

Tomorrow I need to wash my laundry, pay the bills, and buy some new shoes.

The most common error with lists is placing the comma before the first item in the list. It is correct to place the comma after the first item.

Incorrect: I am looking for a partner who is, trustworthy, caring, and funny.

Correct: I am looking for a partner who is trustworthy, caring, and funny.

Note: While it is more common to put a comma after the second-to-last item (before “and”), some writers and style guides choose to omit it. These exercises use the comma.