

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Commas

Rule 1

Use commas to separate items in a series of more than two items. These items may consist of words, phrases, or clauses. Put a comma before "and."

Words: I'd like a big bowl of fruit with **apples, pears, peaches, and plums.**

Phrases: He liked **going to the movies, eating at fancy restaurants, and visiting museums.**

Clauses: She liked him **when he was thoughtful, when he was kind, and when he was relaxed.**

Hint: A phrase is a group of words that go together but do not have a subject and verb: in the morning, running quickly, at noon.

A clause is a group of words with a subject and verb: John went to the store.

Rule 2

Use commas to separate introductory elements from the rest of the sentence. These can be words, phrases, subordinate clauses, or transitional phrases.

Words: **Usually,** he took a nap after lunch.

Quickly, he drew his gun and fired.

Phrase: **Coming through the alley,** the car swerved to avoid a garbage can.

In the morning, I will go to see the teacher.

After lunch, I went to see the movie.

Clause: **Although he had already eaten dinner,** he sat down to have a sandwich.

Because you are my friend, I will help you.

Transitional Expression: **In other words,** I'm in love.

On the other hand, meat loaf is fattening.

Note: The comma is optional after commonly-used introductions of time, such as **today, tomorrow, yesterday, now, and then** and short prepositional phrases of time, such as **on Monday.**

Rule 3

Use commas to separate coordinate (or equal) adjectives. To test whether the adjectives are coordinate, reverse the order and put "and" between them. If they still make sense, they are coordinate.

They were **happy, friendly** puppies.

Note: it's correct to say "friendly and happy," so these are coordinate adjectives.

They ate at a **fancy French** restaurant.

Note: It is not correct to say "French and fancy restaurant," so these are **not** coordinate and **do not** need commas.

The following types of adjectives are usually NOT separated by commas: those that show

Article/Pronoun	Number	Value	Size	Shape	Age	Color	Composition	Noun
The	four	nice	little		old	gray-haired		ladies
Some		good	large	square		blue	plastic	boxes
My	Six	expensive	little			spotted		dogs
A	dozen	wonderful	large	round	new		silver	coins

Rule 4

Use commas to separate independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*

I went to the store, **but** I forgot to buy milk. It was dark, **and** I had to walk home.

Rule 5

Use commas to set off an appositive from the rest of the sentence. When a noun is immediately followed by a group of words that explains or renames it, that group of words is called an appositive. An appositive set off by commas is not essential for the meaning of the sentence; it merely gives additional descriptive information.

Walt Whitman, **a famous American poet**, was a very interesting person.

Note: "A famous American poet" explains who Walt Whitman is, and it is an appositive, but he is already identified by name so the information is not essential.

Ordinary People, **a novel by Judith Guest**, is a story about a young boy coming to terms with his brother's death.

Note: When the appositive consists of only one word, generally a proper noun that is essential for identification, it is not set off by commas.

My neighbor **Natalie** is a very dear friend, and her friend **Bill** is working for the school.

Rule 6

Use commas to set off parenthetical remarks or interjections: *as a matter of fact, believe me, I am sure, I assure you, in fact, it seems to me, to tell the truth, consequently, hence, first, second, third, similarly, oh, wow, well, etc.*

He is, **I am sure**, trying his best.
By the way, you did a very good job.
First, you must do your homework.
Oh, you are so handsome!

Rule 7

Use commas after each part of an address.

He lives at **224 Burnside, San Francisco, California**.
I drove to **Carmel, California**, to see my friends.

Note: A one-word (or name) address preceded by a preposition (*in, on, at, near, from, etc.*) is not followed by a comma.

He is **from New York City** on the East coast.
They went **to Fresno** for the party.

Rule 8

Use commas after each part of a date.

I arrived on **Wednesday, June 16, 1990**, in the afternoon.
I was born on **December 16, 1944**, in Richmond, California.

Note: A one-word date preceded by a preposition (*in, on, at, near, from, etc.*) does not need a comma.

I will go to the prom **on Monday** after I finish work.

Rule 9

Use commas to achieve clarity, even in places where one might not usually put a comma, or to emphasize a contrast.

Whatever he **did, did** no good.
He came to the dance with **me, not** with you!

Rule 10

Use commas to set off out-of-place adjectives. Adjectives usually precede the noun in English, but if the adjectives follow the noun, they are set off.

The **tall, mysterious** man walked slowly down the street.
The man, **tall and mysterious**, walked slowly down the street.

Rule 11

Use commas to set off non-restrictive phrases or clauses in a sentence.

Restrictive: necessary for identification (tells which one) and not separated by commas. A restrictive phrase or clause cannot be removed without losing some of the basic meaning of the sentence.

The woman **who is holding a gun** is by the door.
Never eat apples **that are green**.

Note: "that are green" is essential to understanding the meaning.

Non-restrictive: gives extra information, but it is not necessary for the basic meaning of the sentence and could be removed.

Steven, **although an obnoxious little brat**, gets straight A's in school.
Mary Jones, **who is wearing a blue dress**, is my neighbor.

Note: "Who is wearing a blue dress" is interesting, but it's not essential to meaning, so it must be set off with commas.

Hint: *That* is used only in restrictive clauses and *which* should be used only in non-restrictive clauses (although sometimes people break the rule regarding *which*).

The dog **that bit me** has rabies.
My dog, **which is very friendly**, is not too bright.

Rule 12

Use commas to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.

"You are my friend," Thomas said.
"Because I love you," he said, "I will lend you my Porsche."

Note: Commas go inside the closing quotation mark.

Rule 13

Use commas to set off a direct address, which is speaking directly to a person.

Bob, have you seen the report that was on the desk?
I know very well, **my friend**, that you have done your share.
My child, there is no free lunch.