

USES OF THE COMMA

The use of the comma is primarily determined by the structure of the sentence. Sound is not a dependable guide; consequently, it is necessary to learn the basic rules.

I. Commas precede coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, yet) that join main clauses.

EXAMPLES

1. We cannot win the battle, nor can we afford to lose it.
2. A crisis strikes, and another presidential fact-finding committee is born.
3. The new leash law did not put all dogs behind bars, nor did it make the streets safe for cats.
4. Motorists may admit their guilt and pay a fine immediately, or they may choose to appear in court within thirty days and plead guilty.
5. They decided not to take a vacation, for they needed the money to remodel their kitchen.
6. The leader of the band can sing, dance, and whistle, but he cannot read music.

II. Commas follow introductory elements such as adverb clauses, long phrases, transitional expressions, and interjections.

ADVERB CLAUSES

1. Whenever I tried to put chains on a tire, the car would maliciously wrap them around a rear axle.
2. If he is a key man on his team, an injury is often insufficient to keep him on the sidelines.
3. Whenever the teacher mentioned the use of the comma, the students groaned.

LONG INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

1. In the folklore of white America, Harlem has long been considered exotic as well as dangerous territory..
2. Before the discovery of insulin in 1921, all young diabetics died before they could grow up.

III. Introductory phrases containing a gerund, a participle or an infinitive, even though short, must often be followed by a comma to prevent misreading.

1. Before leaving, the soldiers demolished the fort.
2. Because of his effort to escape, his punishment was increased.

IV. Introductory transitional expressions and interjections are ordinarily followed or set off by commas.

1. She was too tired to go to class. In fact, she fell asleep during the lecture.
2. A good paragraph must be complete in its development. Also, it should be unified in its structure.
3. The woman was immaculately dressed. Her companion, on the other hand, was shabbily dressed.

V. Use commas to separate elements in a series. A series consists of three or more sentence elements of the same kind used in the same way.

NOUNS: He brought a pen, a pencil, and some ink.

VERBS: I jumped from my chair, ran to the window, and peered out into the street.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES: Lincoln believed in government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

DEPENDENT CLAUSES: We agreed that we had been unjustly treated, that we should fight for our rights, and that we would begin at once.

INDEPENDENT CLAUSES: He came, he saw, and he conquered.

VI. VI. Adjectives which are coordinate (equal in value) must be separated by commas. The simplest way to determine whether two adjectives are coordinate is to see if they can be joined by a coordinating conjunction, such as "and."

1. GRAY, FLEECY CLOUDS
2. GRAY STORM CLOUDS
3. LARGE, UNINTERESTING CLASSES
4. LARGE FRESHMAN CLASSES

NOTICE THE PUNCTUATION OF ADJECTIVES IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE:

Behind the cabin were three tall, scraggly pine trees.

FOUR ADJECTIVES MODIFY TREES, BUT ONLY TWO OF THEM ARE COORDINATE.