Commas

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The Logic of Commas

If no comma separates two words, readers will join them together. Commas show readers the parts of an idea.

Incorrect and Confusing:
The classroom was absolutely perfect for students were smiling as they sat at their desks.

Correct and Logical:
The classroom was absolutely perfect, for students were smiling as they sat at their desks.
Comma Uses

A comma is often used with these items:

- Introductory elements
- Coordinating conjunctions
- Subordinating conjunctions
- Relative Pronouns
- Conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases
- Interruptions
- Adjectives
- Addresses and dates
- A lead-in phrase for a quotation
Introductory Elements

When a word, a phrase, or a dependent clause introduces the main clause of a sentence, a comma is used to separate the word groupings from each other. The main clause (an independent clause) must contain both a subject and a verb.

On several desks in the classroom, textbooks were already open.
Short Introductory Elements

If a very short prepositional phrase introduces a clause, then the introductory comma is optional. Both of these sentences are correct:

In 2010 thousands of textbooks were in the bookstore.

In 2010, thousands of textbooks were in the bookstore.

Whenever readers might become confused and have to reread parts of a sentence, a comma is required.

Wrong:  In 7070 textbooks will still be fun to read.

Correct:  In 7070, textbooks will still be fun to read.
Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions (fanboys) join together similar clauses, words, or phrases.

\[ \text{fan} \quad \text{and} \quad \text{nor} \quad \text{but} \quad \text{or} \quad \text{yet} \quad \text{so} \]
Coordinating Conjunctions
Joining 2 Independent Clauses

When two independent clauses are joined with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is needed:

One student was reading a poem, and another was reading a story.
Coordinating Conjunctions
Joining 2 Words or Phrases

When 2 words or phrases are joined with a coordinating conjunction, no comma is used:

The story **and** the poem were both in literature textbooks.
Coordinating Conjunctions
Joining at Least 3 Words

When at least 3 words or phrases are joined with a coordinating conjunction, commas are needed:

The book contained over a hundred stories, poems, and plays.
Subordinating Conjunctions

A **subordinating conjunction** connects a dependent (subordinate) clause to an independent clause.

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after  although  as  as if  because
before  even  even though
if    since  though  unless  until
when  where  whether  while
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Subordination in the Beginning

When a subordinate clause begins a sentence, a comma is needed to separate the two clauses:

\[ \text{after} \quad \text{because} \quad \text{if} \quad \text{while} \quad \text{though} \quad \ldots \]

\[ \text{dependent clause} \quad (\text{subject} + \text{verb} \ldots) \quad \text{independent clause} \quad (\text{subject} + \text{verb} \ldots) \]

While many of the poems were short, most of the plays were long.
Subordination in the Ending

If a subordinate clause is at the end of a sentence, the comma is usually omitted.

Most of the plays were long while many of the poems were short.
Conjunctive Adverb or Transitional Phrase

Two clauses can be joined with a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase. A semi-colon (or a period) must be placed before the conjunctive word or phrase; then, a comma is put after the adverb or phrase.

The book contained many short poems; for example, one poem only had fourteen words.
Interruptions

When a clause is interrupted with a conjunctive adverb or another word(s), commas are needed before and after the interrupting element.

A wonderful short poem, for example, is Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro.”
Relative Pronouns “Relate” Ideas

A relative pronoun (who, whom, that, which, whoever, . . .) “relates” the words inside of its dependent clause to a noun or a pronoun in an independent clause.

Anyone who is happy can stay.
Relative Pronouns in Dependent Clauses

Relative pronouns can join a dependent clause to an independent clause.

Independent (main) clause:
Anyone can stay.

Independent clause with an essential dependent clause:
Anyone who is happy can stay.
The meaning of “Anyone” is changed by “who is happy.”
Relative Pronouns and Essential Meaning

When a dependent clause is essential to the meaning of a noun or pronoun, the dependent clause is restricting or changing the meaning of the noun or pronoun. A reader will need to put both of these items together, so no comma is used.

Anyone who is happy can stay.
Relative Pronouns and Unessential Meaning

If a dependent clause is unessential to the meaning of a noun or pronoun, then the dependent clause is nonrestrictive. (It does not change the meaning of the noun or pronoun.) A reader will need to keep both of the items separate, so commas are needed.

Mary, who is happy, is a great student. (“Mary” has the same meaning, whether or not “who is happy” is included in the sentence.)
Similar Adjectives

A comma is needed to separate coordinate (similar) adjectives. To figure out if adjectives are coordinate or not, a writer can join the adjectives together with the word “and.” If the adjectives joined by “and” still make sense and have the same meaning, then they are coordinate adjectives.

The intelligent, creative student is happy.

A comma is placed between “intelligent” and “creative” because “and” can join the adjectives together: The intelligent and creative student is happy.
Different Adjectives

If two different kinds of adjectives modify a noun, they cannot logically be joined together with the word “and.” Therefore, no comma is needed.

The two creative students read their books.

No comma is used because “two” and “creative” cannot logically be joined by “and”: The two and creative students read their books.
Addresses and Dates

In addresses and dates, commas separate different elements from each other:

Joe was born on August 30, 1997, in a hospital located at 101 Main Street, Warwick, Rhode Island 02886.

A comma is no longer included between a state and zip code.
Signal Phrases for Quotations

A signal phrase needs a comma to separate it from the quotation:

In “Sonnet 116,” William Shakespeare says, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments.”

If lead-in words and a quotation are combined together into a single complete clause, then no comma is used:

William Shakespeare talks about love and connects it to “the marriage of true minds” in “Sonnet 116.”
More Information

The Writing Center at the Community College of Rhode Island has more online resources.
Contact Information

This presentation is the creation of

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