

## Commas

The comma is a punctuation mark used to separate information within a sentence. Commas are used to separate:

- three or more items in a list,
- complete thoughts joined by a coordinating conjunction,
- a complete thought from its introduction, and
- non-essential information.

### Lists of three or more items (Oxford comma)

When making lists of *at least three* items, a comma should follow each item before the final item listed.

*Examples:*

- Add the second substance, stir, and record any observations.
- Today's ceremonies will consist of a procession, a greeting, a keynote speech, and a reception.

When deciding whether or not to put a comma before the *and* that comes before the last item in a list the answer is one of preference: a comma may or may not be included. A comma placed before the *and* is called an Oxford comma.

Although the final comma is not always required, adding the final comma can be a helpful habit to develop. In certain situations, the Oxford comma may avoid confusing the reader.

Example: "I went to the beach with my parents, Bill and Marie." Without a comma before the *and* this sentence can be understood two ways.

- First, I could have gone to the beach with two people, my parents, whose names are Bill and Marie. This would be using a comma to separate an independent clause from non-essential information.
- Second, I could have gone to the beach with four people: both of my parents, a friend of mine named Bill, and another friend of mine named Marie. An Oxford comma would have clarified to the reader that I actually went to the beach with four people instead of letting the reader guess.

### Separating independent clauses

When a sentence contains two independent clauses that are linked by a coordinating conjunction, a comma is usually placed before the coordinating conjunction. The seven coordinating conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet*. An easy test to see if a comma is required is to count the subjects before and after the coordinating conjunction, as each independent clause includes its own subject.

*Examples:*

- "The article includes many examples *and* is well written." → This sentence contains only one subject *article*, so it does not require a comma.
- "The planter class did not want to lose its free source of labour, *but* the abolitionists were determined to demolish slavery." → There is a subject before and after the coordinating conjunction *but* (planter class and abolitionists), so a comma is required.

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### Separating introductory information

A comma is used to distinguish between the main idea in a sentence and words or phrases, which help to introduce the main idea. Introductory information includes transitional expressions (such as *in addition* or *consequently*) and dependent clauses.

*Examples:*

- There are flaws in postmodern discourse. However, elements of postmodernism could be used to help minority groups gain equal rights.
- Despite his regular absence from the domestic sphere, Ramsay is a continuous presence in the thoughts of his wife and children.

The comma in each example above clearly separates the main idea of the sentence (the independent clause) from its introduction (shown as underlined).

### Separating non-essential information

Sentences often include words or phrases with information that is not essential to a reader's understanding. Using commas is one way to separate this information from the rest of a sentence is by.

*Examples:*

- Philadelphia, an important landmark of American history, is also known as "The City of Brotherly Love."
- The irony of this, however, is that Mina acts with her own brand of vampirism.

As the examples demonstrate, two commas are used to indicate non-essential information (shown as underlined).

### Practice: Commas

Put commas where they are needed within the sentences.

1. You should bring a pen a notebook and your textbook to every class.
2. Mrs. Taylor my housekeeper comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
3. I attended the conference but I didn't lecture.
4. He is a knowledgeable informative professor.
5. If I decide to take that course I will have a heavy workload.
6. Therefore you should consider my proposal.
7. My parents Lindsey and Bob came to the wedding.
8. As difficult as it was getting the scuba diving license was very rewarding.
9. Please pick up some milk avocados and one peach on your way home.
10. Additionally we are running low on ketchup.

## Answers:

1. You should bring a pen, a notebook, and your textbook to every class.
2. Mrs. Taylor, my housekeeper, comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
3. I attended the conference, but I didn't lecture.
4. He is a knowledgeable, informative professor.
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