



# The Comma: How to Use It

“A punctuation mark that separates words or groups of words within sentences”<sup>1</sup>

## When to use commas:

### Lists or Series

Commas are used to divide a list of three or more items; however, they are not required between the last two items in the list.

*David decided to sell his car, fly to Germany and eat sausages.*

When you have a list of adjectives, use commas only if all of the adjectives modify the noun independently of one another. One way to test this is to see if the adjectives can be joined with “and.” If so, you should use commas to separate the adjectives.

*A large, hairy spider startled Miss Muffett. (“Large and hairy” would also make sense.)*

Other adjectives are cumulative because they depend on one other. (That is to say, each adjective modifies a larger word group – both the noun and the other adjective or adjectives that describe it.) Cumulative adjectives cannot be joined with “and.” These adjectives should not be separated by commas.

*Several black clouds threatened to rain on the outdoor concert. (“Several and black” would not make sense.)*

### 1. Introductory and Transitional Phrases

Commas are used to separate introductory and transitional phrases or words that are used at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.

*In times like these, I recommend wearing galoshes and carrying a raincoat.*

*You do know, however, that every cloud has a silver lining.*

### 2. Before Direct Speech

Commas are used to introduce direct speech.

*Laura advises, “Run mad as often as you choose, but do not faint.”*

<sup>1</sup> Laurie Rieszner and Stephen Mandell, *Writing First*, 5th ed. (Boston: Bedford, 2012), 584.

### 3. Connecting Two Complete Thoughts

Commas are used to connect two complete thoughts joined by a *conjunction* (and, or, nor, but, for, while, yet, so).

*I wanted to go to the Exhibition, but I had to buy paper clips instead.*

### 4. Appositives and Nonessential Elements

Commas are used to separate *appositives* (nouns or noun phrases that rename a nearby noun) and to separate pieces of nonessential information. An element is nonessential if it can be removed without significantly changing the meaning of the sentence.

*Bilbo Baggins loves his home, the Shire. (Appositive)*

*Van Gogh's painting, one of my favourite pieces, hangs in New York City's Museum of Modern Art. (Nonessential Information)*

### 5. Addresses or Dates

*On Friday, September 12, 1873, the first functional typewriter was sold to customers.*

*Tyndale University is located at 25 Ballyconnor Court, Toronto, Ontario, M2M 4B3.*

#### When not to use commas:

#### 1. Never place a comma between the subject and the main verb of the sentence.

✘ Incorrect: Getting enough sleep during mid-terms, is sometimes difficult.

✔ Correct: Getting enough sleep during mid-terms is sometimes difficult.

#### 2. If a sentence has two main verbs (*compound verbs*), never place a comma between the two.

✘ Incorrect: I sat on a roof, and kicked off the moss.

✔ Correct: I sat on a roof and kicked off the moss.

#### 3. Never use a comma to separate essential information. An element is essential if it cannot be removed from the sentence without significantly altering the sentence's meaning.

✘ Incorrect: Students, who fail to study, will not succeed in school.

✔ Correct: Students who fail to study will not do succeed in school.