

The comma is used to **separate** or to **enclose** certain elements within a sentence. It is used to ensure clear writing and accurate reading. The comma often reflects vocal pause.

## Separating Certain Elements within a Sentence

1. When two independent clauses are joined by a **coordinating conjunction** (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet), place a comma before the conjunction.

e.g. My birthday party was on Saturday, but it was rescheduled for Sunday.  
He returned, for he had forgotten his car keys.

The comma may be omitted when two clauses are short and closely related, when a pause is not needed, and when ambiguity does not result.

e.g. The lightning flashed and the thunder roared.

2. Place a comma after each item in a **series** unless all the items are joined by coordinating conjunctions.

e.g. We visited Italy, France, and England.  
Mrs. Jones was a very thoughtful, gracious, caring young woman.  
I can travel by plane or train or boat.

3. When two or more **adjectives** are in a series, they may be separated by commas. Since all adjectives do not carry out quite the same function in a sentence, they are not always separated by commas in the same way.
  - a. **Coordinate adjectives** are separated by commas. Adjectives in a series are coordinate if each one modifies the noun separately and is more or less independent of the others in the series.

e.g. The dog's coat was wet, muddy, and bloody.

In this example the order of the adjectives can be changed, or the conjunction "and" can be inserted in place of the commas, without seriously affecting the sense of the sentence.

e.g. The dog's coat was muddy and bloody and wet.

- b. **Non-coordinate adjectives** are not separated by commas. Adjectives are not coordinate if each one in the series modifies the total concept that follows it, and the adjectives are interdependent. Their order may not be changed, nor may “and” be substituted, without altering the original meaning of the sentence.

e.g. Horace Grove was the handsome black bank manager.

**NOT:** Horace Grove was the handsome and black and bank manager.

4. Place a comma after an **introductory expression** or **explanation**.

- a. Some common **introductory expressions** are:

after all	by the way	of course	as you know	to be sure
yes	no	well	in the first place	at first

- b. Examples of **introductory explanations**:

e.g. Our tax bill having been paid, we started a budget for the next year.  
When children are told one thing and see another, many things can happen.

In evaluating the movie, the critic drew upon his experiences in television acting.

5. Use a comma to set off **contrasting** or **transposed elements**.

- a. Examples of **contrasting elements**:

e.g. He needs money, not sympathy.  
The more we talked, the slower we walked.

- b. Examples of **transposed elements**:

e.g. The witness, silent and reserved, answered almost inaudibly.  
The wind, intense, cold, and continuous, devastated the blossoming orchards.

6. Use a comma wherever one is necessary for **clarity** and wherever one is needed to indicate a **pause**.

e.g. After the dinner was over, the table was cleaned.  
He hurried to the library, for his books were overdue.

## Enclosing Certain Elements Within a Sentence

1. Enclose **appositives** with commas. An **appositive** is an expression that renames or explains the noun preceding it.

e.g. Michael, my brother, has an idea.

The dolphin, a fish that is reported to be able to talk with man, is the subject of intensive research.

2. Set off words in **direct address** with commas. **Direct address** is the name, title, or descriptive term used when a person or a group of persons is spoken to directly.

e.g. The situation, ladies and gentlemen, is critical.

The problem, Senators, is the Congress.

3. Enclose **parenthetical** or **nonrestrictive elements** with commas. Parenthetical and nonrestrictive elements are elements that are not essential to the meaning of a sentence.

(**Nonrestrictive** means **nonessential**.)

e.g. Ann Smith, who lives next door, won the shot-put.

William, hurrying, arrived in time for his appointment.

4. In dialogue, set off **expressions** with commas.

e.g. “No”, Sam replied irritably, “I won’t go!”

“The point”, the instructor said, “is that you must complete the test to pass.”

5. Set off **dates** and **addresses** with commas.

e.g. He lives at 1234 Buffalo Road, Bradford, Ontario.

Jesse was born on June 12, 2001.

6. The comma used after the **salutation** of a friendly letter and after the complimentary **closing** of any letter.

e.g. Dear John, ...

Sincerely, ...

## Comma Don'ts

1. Do not use a comma after 'the following' or 'as follows'.

e.g. The tools included the following: a hammer, a drill, and a saw.

**NOT:** The tools included the following, a hammer, a drill, and a saw.

2. Do not use a comma between a subject and its verb (no matter how many words or punctuation marks the subject contains).

e.g. Oranges, melons, lettuce, and broccoli are grown in Arizona.

**NOT:** Oranges, melons, lettuce, and broccoli, are grown in Arizona.

3. Do not use a comma between an adjective and the noun immediately following it.

e.g. Tim became a respected portrait painter.

**NOT:** Tim became a respected, portrait painter.

## Review and Practice

Mark **correctly** punctuated sentences **C**

Mark **incorrectly** punctuated sentences **P**

Correct the sentences that do not have proper punctuation.

1. \_\_\_ We need peace, not war.
2. \_\_\_ Remember not to walk on the lawn gentlemen.
3. \_\_\_ We had of course, to call the doctor.
4. \_\_\_ Marco Polo, the Italian explorer, introduced spaghetti to Italy.
5. \_\_\_ The mouse ate the cheese and crackers and the cat ate the mouse.
6. \_\_\_ Ruth's car broke down Friday April 11, 1998.
7. \_\_\_ The report that was published last Tuesday was not accurate.
8. \_\_\_ Yes George will be there, even if I have to carry him.
9. \_\_\_ The customs officer refused to meet me.
10. \_\_\_ In that case you will find a screwdriver in the glove compartment.

## Answers

1. C
2. P Remember not to walk on the lawn, gentlemen.
3. P We had, of course, to call the doctor.
4. C
5. P The mouse ate the cheese and crackers, and the cat ate the mouse.
6. P Ruth's car broke down Friday, April 11, 1998.
7. C
8. P Yes, George will be there, even if I have to carry him.
9. C
10. P In that case, you will find a screwdriver in the glove compartment.