

Commas: Top Tips

1. Commas are not guesswork

A comma indicates a pause, hesitation or interruption in a sentence. This guide offers a few of the most common uses for commas. You will find many more examples in punctuation guides

2. Commas for items in a series

A comma is used to separate three or more items in a series of words, phrases or clauses.

Example: I am studying **English, History and Film Studies.**

Example: The role of the teacher includes **planning the lessons, classroom management, assessing progress and working with other teams.**

Note: You do not usually need a comma before the final 'and' in a list unless there is danger of ambiguity.

Example: I interviewed the Store Managers from Debenhams, Holland and Barrett and Lloyds. (Is Holland a store and Barrett and Lloyds another store?)

A comma makes the meaning clear.

Example: I interviewed the Store Managers from Debenhams, Holland and Barrett, and Lloyds.

Do not put a comma before the first item in a list.

3. Commas with co-ordinating conjunctions

Co-ordinating conjunctions are linking words, such as **but, or, yet, for, and, nor.**

If you use a **co-ordinating conjunction** in short sentences, you **do not** need a comma.

Example: Oscar Wilde wrote short stories and plays.

Example: Children working in mills did not have a decent diet or accommodation or wage.

However, longer sentences with co-ordinating conjunctions need a comma to indicate a pause.

Example: I told my tutor the dog had chewed up my essay, swallowed my pen-drive and chewed the cable on my PC, but she still wants the essay in by Friday.

Note: Make sure the comma goes before the conjunction

Library & Learning Services

When linking two sentences, do not use a comma instead of a conjunction, full stop or semi-colon.

The day was bright, there were no clouds.	X
The day was bright because there were no clouds.	✓
The day was bright. There were no clouds.	✓
The day was bright; there were no clouds.	✓

4. Direct address

Use a comma after the person's name, when writing directly to someone (for example in an email) or when showing direct speech).

Example: **Jane**, will you let me know when you have finished your part of the presentation please?

Example: “**Can I help you**, madam?”

You do not need a comma when writing *about* someone.

Example: Jane said she will have her part of the presentation finished by Friday.

5. Introductory expressions (need commas)

Unfortunately, I will not be able to make the meeting today.

On the other hand, Buzan (2002) suggests that the memory can be improved by using association and mnemonics.

6. Parenthesis

This is used to insert an expression that is not essential but adds information to a sentence. It is enclosed in a **pair** of commas (parentheses).

Example: Students beginning their first semester, who wish to improve their study skills, should access Learning Services' online resources.

Take out the parentheses, and the meaning is still clear.

Example: Students beginning their first semester should access Learning Services' online resources.

7. Phrases and Clauses

A phrase is a group of words that work together but do not make sense on their own in the way that a sentence does.

Example: Chilean dry white wine (phrase). I love Chilean dry white wine. (sentence)

A **clause** is a group of words where one thing is happening. When linked together, clauses make up longer and more interesting sentences.

Example: The LRC is very busy because dissertations are due in this month.

- The LRC is very busy (clause)
- because (linking conjunction)
- dissertations are due in this month. (clause)

A comma is needed to separate two clauses when the first clause is not closely related to the second clause.

Example: New students should enrol here, whilst continuing students need to enrol on the First Floor.

Use a comma after signposting words and phrases:

- however, indeed, nevertheless, in fact, no doubt, incidentally, for example, on the contrary, of course

Do not separate a subject from its verb with a comma.

The verb 'are' *links* the subject to the additional information.

This year's resources are better than last year's	✓
This year's resources, are better than last year's	X

8. Commas to avoid misunderstandings

Besides Mary Anne is the only experienced driver. (Who is the experienced driver?)

Adding a comma not only makes the meaning clear, it also changes the meaning in each sentence.

Example:

Besides, Mary Anne is the only experienced driver.

Besides Mary, Anne is the only experienced driver.

9. Addresses and dates

Commas are used to set apart the names of towns, cities, countries, and days and years in sentences.

Example: Picasso was born in **Malaga, Spain**, on **25 October, 1881**.

10. Additional resources

Burt, A. (2004) *Quick Solutions to Common Errors in English*. 3rd ed. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.

Field, M. (2001) *Improving your Written English*. 3rd ed. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.

King, G. (2004) *Good Punctuation: the one-stop punctuation solver*. Glasgow: Harper Collins.