

# 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

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 <b>because</b> 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 <b>are</b> better than last year's	✓
This year's resources, <b>are</b> 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*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.

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

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