

# Commas

## 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

### 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 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.

### 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 an adequate diet or accommodation or wage.

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

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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.

Example: The day was bright, there were no clouds.

This is incorrect. Alternatives include:

The day was bright because there were no clouds.

The was bright. There were no clouds.

The day was bright; there were no clouds.

## 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.

## Introductory words or phrases (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.

## 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).

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Example: Students beginning their first semester, who wish to improve their study skills, should access Uniskills.

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

Example: Students beginning their first semester should access Uniskills.

## 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: Catalyst building is very busy because dissertations are due in this month.

Catalyst building 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.

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Example: This year's resources are better than last year's.

It would be incorrect to write:

This year's resources, are better than last year's.

## 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.

## 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.