

Writing and Tutorial Center

Making Sense of Commas

It can be easy to get lost in a long sentence full of unnecessary commas, but it also can be very jarring to read a series of short sentences that could have been combined. There are many other uses for commas beyond lists, joining clauses, or introductory clauses—let's discuss some of the more common ways:

JOINING TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES WITH A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

An independent clause is the basic structure of a sentence; it contains a subject and a verb. We can combine two independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions are words that specifically join them:

CHART	For – gives the reason/cause	It was a hot day, for it was July in Georgia.
	And – joins similar ideas	It was a hot day, and it would be a hot night.
	Nor – indicates additional negative	She wasn't hungry, nor was she thirsty.
	But – indicates contrast	She wasn't hungry, but she was thirsty.
	Or – offers alternative	He could run, or he could rest.
	Yet – indicates contrast more formally	He couldn't run, nor could he rest.
	So – gives result	They were happy, so it was a good day.

SEPARATING ITEMS IN A LIST

When listing three or more things, we separate them with commas so that it is clear each is a different item in the list:

As a child his favorite things were his parents, Elmo, and dinosaurs.

Baker's flag was hot pink, red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, indigo, and violet.

The Oxford comma refers to using a second comma in a list of three. Technically the only necessary comma is between the first and second item since the second and third are separated by 'and.' However this can be confused with a relative clause. Consider the above example without the second comma:

As a child his favorite things were his parents, Elmo and dinosaurs.

That could imply that his parents were a muppet and all dinosaurs ever, though we can obviously tell that isn't what was meant. If there's a question of clarity when listing then include the comma.

INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

This is known as participle phrase, which are fragments that may begin a sentence and are attached to an independent clause. When a participle phrase is at the beginning of a sentence, it requires a comma:

Grabbing his briefcase before putting on his coat, he rushed out of the house.

Slowly and with great trepidation, the cat crept closer to us.

PARENTHETICAL ELEMENTS (ALSO KNOWN AS "INTERRUPTERS" / NON-RELATIVE CLAUSES)

These indicate tone or add extra information:

Her hair, which he is inordinately obsessed with, is in extreme disarray from the rain.

Their exciting, if not tumultuous, time as lovers ended over the summer.

RELATIVE CLAUSES

There are two types of relative clauses, defining and non-defining, and they have different rules for commas. If the relative clause defines the noun, no comma is needed [restrictive]:

Her painting which she worked on for three months is fascinating.

Implies she has multiple paintings, and the one she worked on for three months is the fascinating one. (The clause is essential to identify which painting.)

If the relative clause adds extra information, commas are necessary [non-restrictive]:

Her painting, which she worked on for three months, is fascinating.

Implies she has one painting, and we're adding an interesting detail. (The clause is not essential.)

Commas = adds an extra detail (non-essential)/no commas = information necessary to identify the noun.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RELATIVE CLAUSES AND PARENTHETICAL ELEMENTS

Relative clauses are grammatical modifiers that describe a noun and use a relative pronoun: who, whom, whose, which, that. You *can* drop the relative pronoun in some restrictive clauses, like when the pronoun functions as the object (not the subject) of the clause:

The design **that** she created was influenced by traditional Japanese attire.

However you cannot omit the relative pronoun when it's the subject of the relative clause:

The painting **that** is on the wall is mine.

If the relative pronoun is followed by a subject and verb, keep it. If the pronoun is followed immediately by a subject (and verb comes later), you can often omit it.

Interrupters/parentheticals are rhetorical asides for tone or nuance, not essential structure. These sentences use dashes, parentheses, or commas. Here is a similar sentence using a parenthetical:

Her painting, a work she spent three months on, is fascinating.

APPOSITIVES

This is a noun or noun phrase that renames or explains another noun right beside it. Use commas around appositives only if the information is extra (non-essential); no commas if it's needed to identify the noun:

Angel Cortez, Tony's partner, is a prolific author of literary criticism. [It's extra info]

The restaurant, one of New York's most popular, has a long history of scandals.

"[Commas \(Eight Basic Uses\)](#)" from Okanagan College.

"[Rules for Using Commas](#)" from Grammarly.