

PURPOSE

A comma [,] makes writing easier to understand by dividing or grouping words or parts of sentences. Many rules guide comma use, but context and writing style can also influence their placement. Despite what some people think, commas are not necessarily placed only where a reader might pause. Instead, use the rules below to guide you.

TOP TEN USES FOR COMMAS

TO SEPARATE INDEPENDENT CLAUSES JOINED BY A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

Independent clauses are complete thoughts with a subject and verb; they can stand on their own as sentences. Coordinating conjunctions are often remembered by the acronym FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

Our galaxy contains more planets than we can easily count, but we can only see a few of them from Earth.

TO SEPARATE A DEPENDENT CLAUSE FROM THE MAIN (INDEPENDENT) PART OF THE SENTENCE

Dependent clauses cannot stand alone as sentences; look for words like *after, since, because, before, if, as, when, etc.*

Even though more plasma missiles were on board, the captain surrendered the ship.

TO SET APART AN INTRODUCTORY PHRASE FROM THE MAIN (INDEPENDENT) PART OF THE SENTENCE

In the deepest parts of space, a traveler is at the mercy of an unforgiving environment.

TO SET APART A NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSE* (*NON-ESSENTIAL* INFORMATION)

The International Space Station, which was launched into orbit in 1998, has hosted astronauts from fifteen nations.

*Note that no comma is used with a restrictive, or essential, clause.

The rockets that carry essential supplies for the International Space Station use state-of-the-art technologies.

TO SEPARATE ELEMENTS THAT INTERRUPT A MAIN CLAUSE (I.E., *HOWEVER, THEREFORE, OR OTHER TC.*)

The federal government, however, has no plans to increase funding for the International Space Station.

TO SET APART TRANSITIONAL ELEMENTS (I.E., *FIRST, SECOND, THIRD, THEN, NEXT, FINALLY, IN ADDITION*)

Finally, the astronauts found the freeze-dried ice cream, and the space party could begin.

WHEN LISTING THREE OR MORE ITEMS (WORDS, PHRASES, OR CLAUSES)

Often journalists omit the comma before a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS), but most writers and readers find it prevents misreading.

An extended journey into space requires food, water, fuel, and anti-gravity medicine.

WHEN TWO OR MORE ADJECTIVES MODIFY THE SAME NOUN AND ARE COORDINATE

Adjectives that could be separated by *and* or *or* without changing the sentence's meaning are coordinate.

The mission commander was a brave, honorable, ambitious officer.

TO SET OFF NON-RESTRICTIVE APPOSITIVES (I.E., *NOUNS OR NOUN PHRASES THAT ARE USED TO RENAME*)

Mercury, NASA's sixties-era space capsule, launched the first Americans into orbit.

TO SET OFF A CONTRASTING OR EMPHASIZED POINT.

Neil Armstrong, not Buzz Aldrin, was the first person to walk on the moon in 1969.