

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*).

- *Writing can be difficult, but it can also be enjoyable.*

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.

- *Because she wasn't sure how to cite an interview using MLA Style, she checked the handbook.*

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

- *When I need to do homework, I go to the computer lab in the KSU Writing Center.*

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

- *Writing, which I have always found difficult, is an essential skill in college and in the "real world."*

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

- *Writing assignments that are difficult are often the most rewarding once complete.*

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

- *Professor Jones, however, has no plans to cancel the final exam.*

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

- *Finally, our group finished the report.*

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

Journalists often omit the comma before the final item in a list of three or more items, but most writers and readers find that it prevents misreading.

- *His favorite authors are Agatha Christie, Neil Gaiman, and Stephen King.*

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.

- *Roald Dahl was a witty, creative writer who created wonderful, entertaining books for adults as well as children.*

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

- *My professor, Dr. Smith, told the class that our homework is due next Monday.*

TO SET OFF A CONTRASTING OR EMPHASIZED POINT.

- *Edna St. Vincent Millay, not Robert Frost, wrote the poem "The Blue-Flag in the Bog."*