

12 Comma Rules

Comma rules can be confusing, not necessarily because they're difficult, but because no one can seem to agree on what they are. One teacher will tell you one rule for using commas while another will tell you exactly the opposite, and the frustrating truth is that they're probably both right. The rules for comma use are, for the most part, firmly set, but there are a few gray areas as well, and it's helpful to know what they are so that you understand where you absolutely need a comma, where you absolutely shouldn't put one, and where you can fiddle around a bit.

1. Use a comma to separate items in a list (nouns and adjectives). If you have more than two nouns or more than one adjective, you need to separate them with commas.

Janet went to the store to buy pasta, broccoli, lemons, and beans.

My favorite pets are cats, dogs, and snakes.

2. In a list of adjectives, you only need two adjectives to use a comma, and if the adjectives come before the noun, don't use "and." You only need to use "and" in a list of adjectives if the list comes after the verb "be." Look at the following sentence.

I have a big, old, warm quilt on my bed.

3. DON'T separate a subject from its verb with a comma. Even if the subject is very long and you feel like you need a comma because anyone reading it would have to pause for a breath, don't do it.

The president of the largest company in North America and his most trusted and esteemed board of advisors (no comma here) wish to see you immediately.

4. Use a comma to separate clauses, both dependent and independent.

Betty walks to work every day, talks to clients, makes appointments, eats lunch, has afternoon meetings, and walks back home.

Just like in the first rule, the final comma (after "meetings") is not necessary in a list of dependent clauses, but as the clauses get longer, leaving out that last comma can get confusing, so it is often better to put it in just be clear.

Betty gets home at 5:30; she and her husband have dinner together; they watch TV for a few hours; and they go to bed around 11:00.

When your clauses are independent (they could stand alone as complete sentences), it is absolutely necessary to use both the comma and the "and" before the final one.

5. Use a comma to set off a non-defining subordinate clause or an appositive. A non-defining subordinate clause gives some information about a noun, but the information is not necessary for identifying that particular noun. These clauses usually begin with "which" or "who."

The Empire State Building, which was built in 1972, is still New York's tallest building.

The non-defining subordinate clause, “which was built in 1972” gives some information about the Empire State Building, but we don’t need that information to identify the building or distinguish it from any other Empire State Buildings. It’s just extra information. An appositive is similar, but it doesn’t include “which” or “who.” It’s a word or phrase which can be substituted for a name.

Bob Vance, the president of Vance Refrigeration, married my coworker Phyllis.

You will notice that short or one-word appositives such as in the phrase “my coworker Phyllis” do not have to be set off with commas.

6. Use a comma to set off expressions of contrast.

It was his money, not his looks, that first attracted me to him.

He doesn’t look for charm in a restaurant, but service.

7. Use a comma to set off a quote.

Then she said to the guy, “Look, I don’t have to take this – not from you,” and she turned and walked away.

“Please,” he begged, “can’t we just talk about this?”

“She stopped and turned around slowly. “It’s too late,” she replied. “You had your chance.”

Use a comma to set off a direct address. *The people are most grateful, Your Honor, for your years of continued service.*

8. Use a comma to signal that the main, independent clause is about to begin (when the sentence begins with something else) or that it is being interrupted. Words that may be used to introduce or interrupt a sentence are in fact, on the other hand, to tell the truth, yes, no, indeed, well, nevertheless, however, in my opinion, etc.

The truth, in my opinion, is that we are all guilty in part. Indeed, I know that I am.

However, I didn’t pull the trigger. Mrs. Peacock, on the other hand, did. If you have any doubts about this fact, please check her purse. You will find the gun there, I believe.

9. Use commas in addresses, dates, and large numbers.

Portland, Oregon

December 13, 2009

1,945,687,238,400

10. Use commas in the salutation and the closing expression of a letter.

Dear Aunt Carol,

If you’re writing a business letter that is very formal, you might substitute a colon (:) for the comma in the greeting. The closing, however, will always use a comma.

Sincerely, Holly

11. If the sentences begins with a prepositional phrase, that phrase must have at least four words in it before it warrants a comma.

At the park Nolan found his lost puppy. (no comma)

At the new soccer field, Porter found a dollar. (comma)

12. Sentences that begin with subordinate conjunctions (clauses) must have a comma.
(Technically, this is part of rule #4, but I wanted to point this out to you.)

SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

after	in order (that)	unless
although	insofar as	until
as	in that	when
as far as	lest	whenever
as soon as	no matter how	where
as if	now that	wherever
as though	once	whether
because	provided (that)	while
before	since	why
even if	so that	
even though	supposing (that)	
how	than	
if	that	
inasmuch as	though	
in case (that)	till	

Although I don't really enjoy action movies, I agreed to watch one with my brother.

While walking the nature trail, Jimmy stepped on a rattlesnake.

Why should I answer you, if you are just going to talk through the explanation?

Because my sister is the oldest child, she believes is my superior.

If Arthur wants to be King of England, he must pull the sword from the stone.

If you can master these twelve comma rules, your writing will be neater, clearer and perfectly acceptable to English writing teachers everywhere, no matter where they stand in the gray areas.

Adapted from <http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/punctuation/comma-rules.html>