

Writing and Study Skills Services – Laurier Brantford
The Valuable, Though Tiny, Comma

Commas act as road signs or a musical ‘rest.’ They let the reader know when to pause in a sentence, and they indicate important information and what is non-essential information.

The Basics

- Do not put commas between the subject, verb, and object in a clause, as these are the main parts of a complete sentence.
- An inserted comma will result in an incomplete clause.

Examples:

- ✗ **Comma between subject and verb:** Mom, gave me a cookie.
- ✗ **Comma between verb and indirect object:** Mom gave, me a cookie.
- ✗ **Comma between indirect and direct objects:** Mom gave me, a cookie.
- ✓ **No comma:** Mom gave me a cookie.

Conjunctive Adverbs or Introductory Phrases

- Conjunctive adverbs or introductory phrases (*however, therefore, also, in conclusion, for example*) should be followed by a comma.
- These words direct the reader to an important point, and a comma will force the reader to pause and notice the information.

Examples:

- ✓ **Nonetheless,** our date has been postponed.
- ✓ **In other words,** we will be going to the movies next weekend.

Independent Clauses

- **A comma splice** occurs when two independent clauses are joined by a comma.
- To fix a comma splice, use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (*and, or, so, yet, but, for, nor*) to separate the two independent clauses.

Examples:

- ✗ **Comma splice:** Den bought a new printer, she returned it yesterday.
- ✓ **Coordinating conjunction:** Den bought a new printer, **but** she returned it yesterday.
- Another way to correct a comma splice is to insert a semicolon into the sentence in place of a comma.

Example:

- ✓ **Semicolon:** Den bought a new printer; she returned it yesterday.

Non-restrictive clauses

- **Non-restrictive** means a clause that is not essential to the sentence; it is extra information.

- Use commas around the non-restrictive clause so that the reader can distinguish necessary information from non-essential information.

Examples: **Incorrect:** I wanted to tell you that even though you are extremely messy you are still my favourite roommate.

Correct: I wanted to tell you that, even though you are extremely messy, you are still my favourite roommate.

Items in a list

- When there are three or more items in a list, place a comma after each item except for the last one.

Example: Mars bars, granola bars, and fruit snacks are all peanut-free options for the kids' lunches.

Proper use of commas in quotations

- Commas are used to isolate who is doing the speaking when there is a quotation.

Example: “When it comes to birthday cake,” Sarah whispered, “I prefer chocolate.”

- When the quotation is a complete sentence, and the attribution to the speaker follows the quotation, replace the period that would normally be at the end of the quotation with a comma.

Example: “Congratulations! You have completed the course,” said the instructor.

Comma use with dates, titles, and addresses

- Below are examples of the proper ways to use commas in daily situations.

Examples: Today is Friday, December 21st, 2007, and we are celebrating the winter solstice!

 Sylvie Briggs, Vice President for Operations, announced her retirement today.

 Post House Residence is located at 41 George Street, Brantford, Ontario.

Common Errors

- Do not use a comma before ‘because’ if it follows an independent clause.

Example: I fell down the stairs because I was trying to snowboard in the house.

- Use a comma after long introductory modifiers (subordinate clauses at the beginning of the sentence).

Example: Because we stayed out late last night, Chanel slept through her alarm.

- Use commas in “**which**” statements, but not in “**that**” statements.

Example: I saw three other girls wearing the same dress that I bought last weekend!
 We walked from Jenny’s house, which is closer to the school.

For more, detailed information on the proper use of commas, see pages 491-506 in *The Brief Penguin Handbook*.

Work Consulted:

Faigley, Lester, Roger Graves, and Heather Graves. *The Brief Penguin Handbook*. Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2008. Print.