

Do not put a comma in front of a dependent or subordinate clause when it follows the main clause.

I was early for class, because it took me less time to bike than to walk.

Using commas correctly can be a challenge, especially if English is not your first language. Practice the rules and ask for help, and eventually you will find the correct use of commas much less problematic.

Accessing More Information

Many books and online sources are available to help you with specific questions on commas. The previously mentioned book *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* is an entertaining guide, as is Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Both books can be found in libraries, in bookstores, and online.

Online sources include:

- The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>
- The Writing Centers at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University: www.csbsju.edu/writingcenters

Acknowledgments

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Where to Find Help on Campus

Consultants at the **Hamline University Writing Center**, located in the basement of Bush Library, are eager to help you with all stages of your writing. We will work with you whether you have just received an assignment and have no idea how to begin or you have a finished draft and want help with revisions.

You can make appointments online at WC Online. Simply follow the instructions at:

<http://rich37.com/hamline>

We look forward to seeing you!



The Writing Center
Hamline University
Bush Library, Lower Level

Using Commas Correctly



We may be tempted to think that punctuation is an insignificant aspect of good writing, but that is not so, particularly in the case of **commas**.

Consider the popular book *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, which points out the difference in meaning a simple comma can provide. The title refers to two versions of the same sentence:

The panda eats shoots and leaves.

The panda eats, shoots, and leaves.

The first sentence describes the typical diet of a panda. The second sentence conjures up an image of a satisfied, gun-toting bear.

We use commas to separate parts of a sentence from one another. When readers see those commas, they know that the parts are being separated for a reason.

Ten Rules for Comma Usage

1. Use commas to separate independent clauses joined by the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet*.

I had a lot of work to do, but I decided to stay a bit longer.

2. Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause.

Clauses often start with words like *although*, *as*, *after*, *because*, *since*, *if*, *while*, or *when*.

After the meeting, the students walked to the park.

Phrases often start with a verb plus *-ing* or *to* plus a verb.

Putting her book down, she rose from the chair and stretched.

To get into the program, you must submit an application.

Words that commonly come before a comma include *however*, *well*, and *yes*.

However, not all members of the audience responded positively.

3. Use commas to set off words, phrases, and clauses that are not crucial to the meaning of the sentence. *That* clauses after nouns are almost always essential, so commas aren't needed.

Tea, my favorite beverage, can be served either hot or cold.

The pencil that you gave me is broken.

4. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a series.

The dessert choices included cookies, ice cream, and chocolate cake.

5. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. If you can write the adjectives in reverse order, or if you can add *and* in between them, use a comma.

a bright, colorful display

a big wood chair

6. Use commas near the end of the sentence to separate contrasting coordinate elements in the sentence or to indicate a voice pause.

They were simply tired, not lazy.

7. Use commas to set off phrases at the ends of sentences that refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. These phrases are called **free modifiers** and can be placed anywhere in the sentence without confusing the reader.

George walked quickly down the street, muttering to himself.

Muttering to himself, George walked quickly down the street.

8. Use commas to set off geographical names, dates (except months and days), addresses (except street names and numbers), and titles in names.

Duluth, Minnesota, is in the northern part of the state.

October 7, 2008, was an important day.

Frank P. Smith, M.D., will speak at the convention.

9. Use commas to set off direct quotations and after the first part of a quotation in a sentence.

"I know," he said, "that it is time to leave."

Katie said, "I will have time to do that later."

10. Use commas anywhere in a sentence to avoid possible confusion or misreading.

To Bob, Dylan was a good friend.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not use a comma to separate a subject from its verb.

The group, is going to leave shortly.

Do not put a comma in between two verbs if the subject stays the same.

I walked in the opposite direction, and ran straight into a wall.