

Commas

Commas help clarify the meanings of sentences. Without them, sentences may not read as easily, and readers may even misunderstand the meaning of the sentence. Fortunately, commas come with a set of rules, which you can easily learn to improve your writing. Below is a list of these rules.

1. Setting off independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction

Coordinating conjunctions connect two independent clauses. Coordinating conjunctions are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*. When using a coordinating conjunction to connect two independent clauses, use a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford on the Avon, but he lived in London for most of his adult life.

Be careful—coordinating conjunctions only have a comma preceding them when they separate two independent clauses.

2. Setting off items in a series

Use commas in a series of three or more.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth*.

In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare plays with meanings of the word “sun” to connect Hal to Apollo, to emphasize the relationship between the king and his son, and to allude to Hal as a prodigal son who will return to his father’s side.

Severed hands, swallowing wombs, and human sacrifice make *Titus Andronicus* one of Shakespeare’s most dismembering plays.

3. Setting off introductory elements

Introductory clauses, which are often also dependent clauses, generally need a comma between the introductory clause and the independent clause of the sentence. Usually, subordinating conjunctions (see handout on dependent and independent clauses) begin an introductory clause.

Although Rosalind spends much of *As You Like It* dressed as a man, she marries Orlando by the end of the play, which contains her within the normal and prescribed gender roles.

Because Rosalind performs the epilogue of *As You Like It*, she subverts (again) the

gender roles normally associated with women, and the layering of costumes—a boy dressed as a girl who pretends to be a boy—only enforces the complicated stance that the play takes on gender.

Also use commas to set off transitional words like *however*, *furthermore*, *therefore*, *moreover*, and *nevertheless*.

4. Setting off nonessential information

Use commas to set off nonessential information at the beginning, middle or end of sentences. There are several indicators that information is nonessential.

Nonrestrictive modifiers

Nonrestrictive: Christopher Marlowe, who wrote *The Jew of Malta*, greatly influenced Shakespeare.

Restrictive: The man who wrote *The Jew of Malta* greatly influenced Shakespeare.

Adjective clauses

“That” generally indicates essential, or restrictive, information; whatever follows “that” in a sentence is necessary for the overall meaning of the sentence.

“Which” generally indicates nonessential, or nonrestrictive, information; whatever follows “which” in a sentence can be removed from the sentence, and the sentence would still contain all its meaning.

Nonrestrictive: *The Tempest*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Cymbeline*, which are generally called romances, were written late in Shakespeare’s career.

Restrictive: The plays that we generally call romances were written late in Shakespeare’s career.

Prepositional phrases

Nonrestrictive: Othello, without speaking to Desdemona, decided to kill her.

Restrictive: The subject matter of Shakespeare’s sonnets often elicits tumultuous debate.

Verbal phrases

Nonrestrictive: Hamlet, desiring adequate revenge for his father’s murder, decides not to kill Claudius during prayer.

Restrictive: The actors playing woman parts were all boys.

Appositives

Shakespeare, the playwright, was successful in business, becoming one of the shareholders of his theater company.

Transitional words or phrases

In fact, the only extant signatures by Shakespeare's own hand appear on legal documents.

Contradictory phrases

Shakespeare, not Marlowe, wrote *The Merchant of Venice*.

Absolute phrases

His reputation increasing, Shakespeare began to sell more tickets.

Miscellaneous nonessential material

Yes, Shakespeare was a great writer.

"O, speak again, bright angel!"

5. Miscellaneous uses of commas

Direct quotations

Shylock says, "I am not bound to please thee with my answers."

"I am a Jew," Shylock says. "Hath not a Jew eyes?"

However, you do not use a comma to introduce a quote when you preface the quote with the word "that."

Juliet said that "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

With titles or degrees

Titania, queen of the fairies, falls in love with an ass.

In addresses and dates

The date April 23, 1564, is traditionally associated with Shakespeare's birthday, though its accuracy is unknown.

Shakespeare lived at 4400 Main Street, Stratford, England 11902. (I made this up....It is not true)

In salutations and closings

Dear Shakespeare,

Love, Lady Macbeth

In long numbers

3,200

6. Examples

1. I tried to build the snow fort without her help, but she, with perfect aim pelted me with snowballs until I let her work on it with me.
A: There should be a comma after “aim.”
B: There should be a comma after “fort.”
C: There should not be a comma after “she.”
D: The sentence is correct as written.
2. She went to bed early last night, but was still late for class this morning.
A: The comma should be moved to after “early.”
B: The comma should be removed from the sentence.
C: The comma should be moved to after “late.”
D: The sentence is correct as written.
3. Lancelot not Gawaine killed the dragon that threatened Camelot.
A: There should be a comma after “dragon.”
B: There should be commas after “Lancelot” and “Gawaine.”
C: There should be a comma after “Lancelot,” but not after “Gawaine.”
D: The sentence is correct as written.
4. Though they had known each other for a very long time and had become very good friends, they frequently argued like cats and dogs.
A: The comma should be moved to after “time.”
B: The comma should be removed from the sentence.
C: The comma should be moved to after “cats.”
D: The sentence is correct as written.
5. On the contrary a bit of bad press is great for business!
A: There should be a comma after “contrary.”
B: There should be a comma after “press.”
C: There should be commas after “contrary” and “press.”
D: The sentence is correct as written.

6. Based on the sales numbers, from last year's report we should order more inventory before Black Friday.
A: The comma should be moved to after "on."
B: The comma should be removed from the sentence.
C: The comma should be moved to after "report."
D: The sentence is correct as written.
7. I finally won a game against the old man, who plays chess in the park every Saturday.
A: There should be a comma after "won."
B: The comma after "man" should be deleted and a comma should be placed after "chess."
C: The comma after "man" should be deleted.
D: The sentence is correct as written.
8. The acrobats, doing flips on the trapeze, got far more applause than the clown, even though the clown, emphasizing his clumsiness, lit himself on fire when he failed to jump through the lion's hoop.
A: The commas before and after "emphasizing his clumsiness" should be removed.
B: The commas before and after "doing flips on the trapeze" should be removed.
C: There should be a comma after "fire."
D: The sentence is correct as written.
9. The Jacksons won the lottery so they began planning a trip around the world.
A: A comma should be inserted after "lottery."
B: A comma should be inserted after "planning."
C: A comma should be inserted after "trip."
D: The sentence is correct as written.
10. The doctor that he went to for a second opinion also told him to stop eating two pounds of bacon per day.
A: There should be commas after "doctor" and "opinion."
B: There should be a comma after "bacon."
C: There should be a comma after "opinion."
D: The sentence is correct as written.
11. The boss doesn't care which of them caused the problem; she just wants the problem which is costing us sales to be solved as quickly as possible.
A: There should be a comma after "sales."
B: The semicolon should be replaced with a comma.
C: There should be commas after "problem" and "sales."
D: The sentence is correct as written.

12. You must eat your carrots, potatoes, peas, greens and beets if you want to grow up big and strong.
- A: A comma should be inserted after “your.”
 - B: A comma should be inserted after “greens.”
 - C: A comma should be inserted after “beets.”
 - D: The sentence is correct as written.
13. Bacon, which is very tasty should not be a large part of your diet.
- A: There should be a comma after “tasty.”
 - B: The comma after “Bacon” should be moved to after “tasty.”
 - C: There should be a comma after “part.”
 - D: The sentence is correct as written.
14. They introduced Bruce Wayne, the man of the hour, and asked him to cut the ribbon on the new hospital wing that he donated.
- A: There should be a comma after “and.”
 - B: There should be a comma after “wing.”
 - C: The commas after “Wayne” and “hour” should be removed.
 - D: The sentence is correct as written.
15. The car, that hit me, was a red Camaro with the license plate number ABC123.
- A: The comma after “car” should be removed.
 - B: The comma after “me” should be removed.
 - C: The commas after “car” and “me” should be removed.
 - D: The sentence is correct as written.

Answer Key

#	Answer	Rule
1.	A	Prepositional phrases
2.	B	Setting off independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction
3.	B	Contradictory phrases
4.	D	Setting off introductory elements
5.	A	Transitional words or phrases
6.	C	Setting off introductory elements
7.	C	Nonrestrictive modifiers
8.	B	Verbal phrases
9.	A	Setting off independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction
10.	D	Adjective clauses
11.	C	Adjective clauses
12.	B	Setting off items in a series*
13.	A	Adjective clauses
14.	D	Appositives
15.	C	Adjective clauses

* Disclaimer: The comma before the conjunction in a series of items is called the “Oxford comma.” This comma is considered optional in some contexts, including journalistic writing; however, MLA, APA, and Chicago manuals of style prefer the Oxford comma.