

# Using Commas Well In College

## A Quick Guide to Comma Use

The Comma. Remember those pesky things that you could never get right and your annoying English teacher always pointed out? Well, they don't have to be your enemy, but a good friend while you write.

Ok, question number one. What is a comma?

A) a state of profound unconsciousness caused by disease, injury, or poison.

B) a punctuation mark, used especially as a mark of separation within the sentence.

C) a toothed instrument used especially for adjusting, cleaning, or confining hair.

If you chose B, you're correct! As the answer states, a comma is a mark of *separation* of things in a sentence. All you need to remember is what they separate. Here are the basic rules:

**Series.** Commas separate items in a series.

I like bananas, oranges, and apples.

The dark, snowy, windy day was normal in Buffalo in February.

In the first example, you don't need the last comma in front of 'and' if you don't want it.

## Conjunctions.

Use commas when you use conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so*) that separate independent clauses. Ok, think back to high school. Hmmm...parties, first date....oh, yeah, clauses! A part of a sentence that has a subject and a verb.

For example:

*I went home, and my mother fixed me dinner.* (How many clauses: 2)



Ok, I get it. But what is an independent clause? Look back at the last example.

**I went home.  
My mother fixed me dinner.**

Each of these clauses can be an independent sentence! They make perfect sense on their own.

Now, things get a little confusing. If an independent clause can stand on its own, a dependent clause can't. Look at the following examples:

I will stay home if it starts to rain.  
If it starts to rain, I will stay home.

What is the dependent clause in the sentences?

If you chose *if it starts to rain*, you win a million dollars (Ok, how about a handshake?) This clause cannot stand on its own. Look at the comma in these sentences. If the dependent clause comes first in the sentence, you need a comma.

**Introductory** words, phrases, or clauses.

This rule is somewhat a continuation of the last. Look at the following examples:

Strangely, he came home early after the party.

Despite the rain, Sarah went out to play.

As I've stated, comma rules aren't hard.

The word, phrase and clauses in all these examples start the sentences and cannot stand on their own. So, they get commas. An easy way to think of it is that these parts of the sentences disrupt the flow.



If the introductory phrase is short and clear, you do not always need a comma

Ex: After the party he went home.

## ’ Disrupting flow.

The manager was, **of course**, late for his conference with his boss.

The phrase *of course* disrupts the flow of the sentence. Normally, you have subject+verb+object in sentences, but the added phrase interrupts the pattern.

## ’ Non-Essential Information

Ok, another example: *John won a scholarship.*

Do you understand the sentence? Yep, it’s simple.

How about this: *John, who is a good student, won a scholarship.*

Question: Would you understand the sentence if you didn’t have *who is a good student* included? Yep again. This information is non-essential. That is, it’s not necessary to understanding the sentence. If information is not necessary, set it off with commas.



If you start a phrase with a comma, don’t forget to end it with a comma.

## ’ Quotes

He said, “I love quotes and commas.”

“Loving commas is great,” he thought.

“Wow,” he screamed, “using commas is fun!”

Ok, the examples are silly, but you get the point. Whenever you write a quote, set it off with commas.

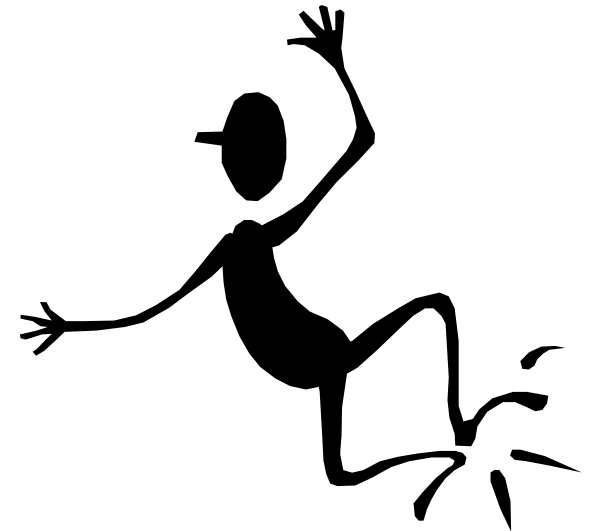
## ’ Review

Ok, see how you do. Put the commas in if necessary.

1. I ate hamburgers hot dogs and pizza.
2. I watched TV but I didn’t see the program.
3. I like it here because we can swim and go fishing.
4. Instead of waiting for him Sally drove off in her car.
5. “I don’t know ” he screamed.

Answers:

1. ...hamburgers, hot dogs(,) and pizza;
2. ...TV, but I...
3. No comma
4. Instead of waiting for him, Sally...
5. “I don’t know,” he screamed.



Hurray!!! You’ve mastered the comma.

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