

Proofreading Skills Tutorial:

**Tutorial #11:
Using Commas**

Writing Center

English 800 Center

All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

Using Commas

Punctuation —such as periods, semicolons, and commas— helps guide readers as they move through a text. The purpose of any punctuation is simply to note pauses between ideas and to clarify where ideas begin and end. One of the most useful punctuation marks in English is the comma. This tutorial will introduce some of the most common uses of the comma.

Commas used to separate a series of words, phrases, or clauses

In the examples below, the comma separates a list or series of *three or more similar or like words, phrases or clauses*. Usually, if there is an “and” or an “or” at the end of the list, include a comma before it.

words: *list of nouns*
This class will focus on reading **plays, poems, novels, and short stories.**

list of adjectives
He thinks that Paris Hilton is **rich, bored, spoiled, naïve, and superficial.**

phrases: Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall
list of verb phrases
pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

--John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address

clauses: During the Loma Prieta earthquake, **some freeways collapsed, buildings shook,**
list of clauses
the Golden Gate Bridge was damaged, and some families lost loved ones.

<p>Principle I. Use commas to separate more than two items in a series of words, phrases, or clauses.</p>
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As a writer, your goal should be to combine short sentences into long, complex sentences that are punctuated correctly. One easy way to join sentences is to use what are called coordinators or coordinating conjunctions.

Commas used before a coordinator when joining two sentences

Commas are used *before* a coordinator (or coordinating conjunction) when joining two sentences. In the examples below, the comma separates two complete sentences:

Karim likes cats, **but** Shireen likes dogs.

His car broke down, **so** he bought a new one.

A useful method to remember coordinators is that the first letter of each one together spells **FANBOYS**:

F or
A nd
N or
B ut
O r
Y et
S o

The most common coordinators are *and*, *but*, and *so*.

<p>Principle II. Use a comma <i>before</i> a coordinator when joining two complete sentences.</p>
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Sometimes writers omit the commas between sentences that are closely related or short and are in no danger of being misread:

Chocolate is delicious but it has caffeine.

Jack fell down and he broke his crown.

Note: It will always be correct to use a comma when joining very short sentences with a coordinator. Please refer to Tutorial 15: *Joining Ideas (Coordination and Subordination)* for more information about how to use coordinators or FANBOYS.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Using Principles I and II, insert commas wherever they are needed in the sentences below. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. He was happy during the Bay to Breakers race since he enjoyed the good weather ran with the fastest finished in the top ten and celebrated with his friends.

He was happy during the Bay to Breakers race since he **enjoyed the good weather, ran with the fastest, finished in the top ten, and celebrated with his friends.**

2. George flew to San Diego got married in a park celebrated with his family and friends and he went to Italy for his honeymoon.
3. After doing research on environmental issues, Enrique was angry about the voting records of the senators the policies of the governor and the legislation of the president.
4. Marco liked the decor of the restaurant delicious appetizers variety of entrees extensive wine list and excellent service.
5. Megan likes granola bars for breakfast because they are tasty rich in fiber and low in calories but she has a bad habit of skipping lunch.
6. The lyrics of Lennon and McCartney are beautiful yet the songs of Keith Richards and Mick Jagger are much more compelling.

Commas used to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses

The comma is also used to set off **introductory words, phrases, or clauses.**

words: **Incidentally,** the Warriors were defeated in the playoffs.

Generally, the weather in San Mateo is temperate and sunny.

phrases: *verbal phrase*
After realizing that she ran through a red light, Julia decided to slow down.

noun phrase appositive or NPA

A controversial poet and social critic, Allen Ginsberg wrote "Howl."

noun phrase appositive or NPA

a poem about self expression.

prepositional phrase

In Houston, \$225,000 will buy a house with a home theater, den, and pool.

Note: Common introductory phrases are reviewed in Tutorial 17: *Verbal Phrases*, Tutorial 16: *Noun Phrase Appositives*; prepositional phrases are covered in the Introductory Tutorial: *Identifying Verbs and Subjects*.

subordinate clause

clauses: **Even though Violeta failed English 848,** she learned so much about how to write an effective essay.

subordinate clause

While real estate in much of the country languishes, property in San Francisco continues to escalate in price.

Principle III. Use a comma to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

Note: The most common introductory clauses begin with a subordinator (or subordinating conjunction). Please see Tutorial 15: *Joining Ideas (Coordination & Subordination)* for more information.

Exercise 2

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, and III, insert commas wherever they are needed in the sentences below.

introductory phrase

Examples: In the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses several sets of couples to dramatize the tribulations and triumphs of love.

introductory phrase

To be honest, Brian revealed that he did not write the essay, for he asked his sister to write it for him.

introductory clause

Because his parents are so strict, Mohammed decided not to tell them that he was going to the rock concert at the Fillmore.

1. After learning of the death of his father Hamlet returns to the Danish court to find Claudius ruling Denmark and Hamlet discovers that Claudius is married to Hamlet's mother Gertrude.
2. To perform well on the SAT exam students must get a good night's rest eat a hearty breakfast come on time and listen carefully to the instructions.
3. Once Jonny graduated college he vowed never to go back to school.
4. In the play *Madame Butterfly* Cio-Cio-San cannot go on living once Pinkerton takes her son so after bidding the child farewell Butterfly does not hesitate and takes her life with the same dagger her own father had used to commit suicide.
5. If you're a fan of the outdoors you'll enjoy exploring the trails at Point Lobos.
6. If you want to preserve tomatoes by canning them harvest while they are still firm for soft tomatoes may contain harmful bacteria that can spoil the contents.

Exercise 3

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, and III, write six sentences with two sentences for each comma rule.

1. Principle I: In each sentence, use a comma to separate more than two items in a series of words, phrases, or clauses.
2. Principle II: In each sentence, use a comma *before* a coordinator (coordinating conjunctions or FANBOYS) when joining two complete sentences.
3. Principle III: In each sentence, use a comma to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

Commas used to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses

Commas are used to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses when the word or group of words interrupts the main idea. These nonessential elements that are set off with commas can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning.

Examples:

words: The Warriors, **unfortunately**, were defeated in the playoffs.

The students will, **however**, protest the increase in tuition.

noun phrase appositive or NPA

phrases: Lake Tahoe, **a popular vacation destination for people from the Bay Area**, offers visitors a variety of water sports.

verbal phrase

Jonny, **pretending that he is in the circus**, jumps up and down on the bed and shrieks with excitement.

phrase

My student Nora, **for example**, has registered for English 850, so she can get additional help with her essay.

Note: The phrase describing Lake Tahoe, “**a popular vacation destination for people from the Bay Area**,” is a noun phrase appositive, and it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Please refer to Tutorial 16: *Noun Phrase Appositives* for more information. The phrase describing Jonny, “**pretending that he is in the circus**,” is a verbal phrase. Please refer to Tutorial 17: *Verbal Phrases* for more information.

adjective clause

clauses: Her cousin, **who attends the University of Oregon**, is coming to the Bay Area next week.

Note: The clause “**who attends the University of Oregon**” is an adjective clause, and it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Adjective clauses modify nouns and begin with words like *who*, *whom*, *which*, *that*, and *whose*. Since in this sentence, the adjective clause helps to describe the noun “her cousin,” commas should set it off. Adjective clauses give writers options for combining sentences by allowing them to include extra information about nouns in their paragraphs without writing whole new sentences. Please refer to Tutorial 19: *Adjective Clauses* for more information.

Principle IV. Use a comma to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses when the word or group of words interrupts the main idea.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, III, and IV, insert commas wherever they are needed in the sentences below. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. Michael Winterbottom's films, which are most notably 1997's *Welcome to Sarajevo* and 2002's *24 Hour Party People*, are beloved by art-house patrons for their varied subject matter, dark moods, and unscripted meanderings, but, unfortunately, they have not been box office successes that generate Oscar talk.
2. The county position offers a great salary retirement plan affordable housing and a beautiful location and as an added bonus some new hiring incentives may apply.
3. Jim Henson who worked professionally as a television puppeteer while he was still in high school and who as early as the 1950s created proto-Muppets that included an early incarnation of Kermit the Frog became perhaps the most famous puppet purveyor in history with "Sesame Street" "The Muppet Show" and a series of box office hits featuring the Muppets.
4. At the Cliff House the long mahogany bar which takes up most of the room was packed with wine sippers in lively conversation. As we were led through the first of the two narrow dining rooms to a cozy window table we thanked ourselves for having planned ahead.
5. Over the past few years studies have suggested that caffeine is capable of staving off baldness lowering the risks of Parkinson's disease killing off skin cancer cells reducing cellulite and firming facial skin.
6. Lined by cottonwoods the Snake River shimmering and slithering along the floor of Jackson Hole reflects the high sun of a lazy sunny afternoon.

Commas used to separate items in dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers

Commas are used to set off items that use dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers.

Examples:

in dates: Julia was born on **January 12, 1989**, in San Francisco, California.

April 21, 1984, was a momentous day in Jay's life when she had her first child.

Note: When using only the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the year:

The average temperatures in **August 2007** are the highest on record for that month.

in places: **Oakland, California,** is an important maritime point of entry for trade in the United States.

Giancarlo's family moved to **Florence, Italy,** where his father bought a restaurant.

Note: Commas set off a state or country when a city or town name is also used:

in addresses: The President of the United States resides at 1600 **Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.**

Note: The comma is used in numbers of one thousand or larger:

in numbers: **12,473**

2,519,146

2,001 *Space Odyssey*

Principle V. Use commas to separate items in dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers.

Exercise 5

Instructions: Using Principles I through V, insert commas wherever they are needed in the sentences below.

Example: With a diameter of **2,160 miles**, the Earth's moon is one of the largest in our solar system, and it is about one quarter of the diameter of the Earth.

1. As Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped onto the moon on July 20 1969 an estimated 600 million people were watching.
2. Do you know what happened on July 4 1776?

3. Temple University is located in Philadelphia Pennsylvania.
4. Pearl Harbor was bombed I think on Sunday December 7 1941.
5. In April 2007 Hugh Grant 32 was arrested after he allegedly chased kicked and threw a can of baked beans at photographer Ian Whittaker and then he cursed the photographer's children.
6. For more than 10 years the Garcias have owned a vacation cabin in McCall Idaho a lakeside town of 2500 residents and in 2006 the couple bought a 2000-square-foot vacation home at Hearthstone a community in McCall for around \$125000.
7. The Earth is about 7926 miles in diameter and it is the fifth largest planet in our solar system after Jupiter Saturn Uranus and Neptune.
8. Bill Walsh the imaginative and charismatic coach who took over a downtrodden 49ers died July 30 2007 at his home in Woodside California at the age of 75 after a three-year struggle with leukemia.

Proofreading for Commas

Try the following strategies to proofread for commas:

1. If you tend to put in too many commas, check and underline each one to see if you can justify it with a principle.
2. As you read your work aloud, add a comma when there is a pause between ideas.

Exercise 6

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on, and incorporate correct use of commas in your own writing.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review

your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay