

The Quirky Comma

The comma performs many useful functions and, if used correctly, can greatly improve the clarity of your writing. The following are some of the rules for the comma.



After introductory words or phrases

- However, the event was cancelled.
- While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.
- When the game finally reached its conclusion, the players raced to the lockers to change.

To separate clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction

Use a comma to separate clauses joined by one of the seven coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) e.g.,

- The student explained her question, but the lecturer still didn't seem to understand.

Around words, phrases, and clauses in the middle of a sentence

In the middle of a sentence, commas are used to set off any string of words, that is either a parenthesis, or in contrast, to whatever went before e.g.,

- Yet when applying fashion trends to ourselves, as film and television do, these media are constantly introducing and reinforcing the assumptions of what we should wear.

To separate items in a series

Use commas to separate items in a list, including the last two (i.e., before "and") e.g.,

- Ward traced the origins of the common man's response to the bush through convicts, outback workers, gold diggers, trade unions, and newspapers.

To make meaning clear

- That Tuesday, which happens to be my birthday, is the only day when I am available.
- To George, John was a real hero.

To offset phrases not strictly necessary to the sentence

- The food at this restaurant, on the other hand, is rather bland.

However, don't use commas to off-set phrases that are necessary for meaning e.g.:

- The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.
- The girl in the red dress is my friend.

Adjectives

Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order *and* if adjectives are written with “and” between them? If the answer is yes, then a comma should separate the adjectives e.g:

- He was a difficult, stubborn child.
- The relentless, powerful, oppressive sun beat down on them.

To separate contrasted elements at the end of a sentence

- He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
- The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human.
- The speaker seemed innocent, even gullible.

Before and after a quotation

- John said without emotion, “I’ll see you tomorrow”.
- “I was able”, she answered, “to complete the assignment”.
- “Archaic sculpture”, the lecturer said, “will be in the exam”.

To separate the main part of the sentence from a question tag

- You were one of the victim’s close friends, weren’t you?

Between addresses, dates, and titles

- Birmingham, Alabama, gets its name from Birmingham, England.
- July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life.
- Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC?
- Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.

Quirky comma quiz

1. In his speech he praised the team’s performance.
2. The puppies were cute but very messy.
3. Fred who often cheats is just harming himself.
4. Sunbathers swimmers sailors and surfers visited the beach.
5. Leon walked on his head a little higher than usual.

Answers

1. In his speech, he praised the team’s performance.
2. The puppies were cute, but very messy.
3. Fred, who often cheats, is just harming himself.
4. Sunbathers, swimmers, sailors, and surfers visited the beach.
5. Leon walked on, his head a little higher than usual.