

COMMAS...

When to use Commas

WRITING SERVICES - UNCW - DEPAOLO HALL, 1ST FLOOR - 962-7857

The comma is probably the most frequently used punctuation; however, it is also the most commonly misused punctuation mark in student writing. Sometimes commas are mandatory in sentences; at others, it is optional. So when do you use a comma?

1. Use a comma between two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* - **FANBOYS**). The comma serves to indicate the end of the first clause and prepare for the introduction of the second clause.

Example: *The student frowned, but the tutor did not understand why he was worried.*

2. Use a comma or commas between coordinate adjectives (i.e., adjectives that independently modify the same noun). Test for coordination by inserting the word “and” between the adjectives without diminishing the clarity or coherence of the sentence.

Example: *The student had mapped out his ideas on a wrinkled, un-lined piece of paper.*

3. Use a comma after a phrase or a dependent clause occurring before the subject of the independent clause.

Example: *After the tutor and student had met, the professor recommended the student schedule a second visit to the Writing Center.*

Note: Consider how omitting the comma can lead to a misreading of the sentence.

4. Use a comma or commas to set off absolute phrases, or a phrase that modifies the whole sentence. An absolute phrase may appear at the beginning or end of the sentence.

Example: *After finally choosing a topic, the student was able to begin brainstorming about her essay.*

5. Use a comma to set off introductory clauses and long modifying phrases.

Example: *Tutoring in the Writing Center, I read hundreds of papers.*

Example: *In addition to going to the Writing Center, Sammy Seahawk also asked his roommate to read his essay.*

6. Use a comma or commas to set off contrasting elements, mild interjections, direct address, conversational words (*yes, no, well*), and tag questions.

Example: *The paper is yours, not mine.*

Example: *Yes, walk-ins are welcome at the Writing Center if a tutor is available.*

7. Use a comma or a pair of commas to set off extra (nonrestrictive) information inserted in a sentence. Nonrestrictive elements can be removed without changing the basic meaning of the sentence.

Example: *Sammy Seahawk, the UNCW mascot, is committed to promoting Seahawk respect in the classroom.*

(over)

8. Use a comma or commas to set off transitional expressions including conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore, moreover*) and transitional phrases (*for example, as a matter of fact, in other words*) that serve as bridges between sentences or parts of sentences.
Example: The conclusion of the paper, *however*, is weak.
Example: The final paragraph, *for example*, fails to summarize the key points of the paper.
9. Use a comma or commas to set off parenthetical expressions that may provide supplemental commentary or information that interrupts the flow of the sentence or appears as an afterthought.
Example: Writing consultations, *as far as tutors are concerned*, serve to support their peers during their writing process.
10. Use a comma in a series or list of more than three words.
Example: The student's paper was *organized, well-written, and free of grammatical errors*.
11. Use a comma to separate a direct quotation from subject and verb.
Example: "The Writing Center has really helped me as a writer," *the student declared*.
12. Use a comma to separate the day of the month from the year.
Example: *On April 15, 1912*, the *Titanic* sank after hitting an iceberg.
13. Use a comma (never a period) to divide numbers into thousands by separating numbers into groups of threes, starting from the right.
Example: 100,000 or 1,000,000
14. Use a comma to separate the parts of an address (i.e., the city from the state; the state from the country, etc.)
Example: The Writing Center is located in DePaolo Hall in *Wilmington, North Carolina*.
15. Use commas around a person's title or degree.
Example: Barack Obama, *President of the United States*, was elected in November 2008.

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