



NO. 28 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Using Commas (1): A Writer's Guide to Those Impossible Rules

Comma rules vary greatly depending on the style used, English versus American usage, and other considerations. Here are some general comma rules that apply for a majority of cases. But be careful, there are always exceptions. If you're not sure, check the St. Martin's Handbook or the recommended style guide.

Use a comma after introductory elements.

Make sure you use a comma after an introductory word, expression, phrase, or clause.

Example: Carefully, the chef added a final touch to his masterful dessert.

Example: To avoid answering the teacher's question, I sunk into my chair.

Use a comma in compound sentences.

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, for, nor, so, or yet*) when it joins two independent clauses (two thoughts that can be complete sentences on their own).

Example: The rain began to pound rapidly, and the thunder grew more frequent.

Use commas to set off nonessential elements.

If the phrase can be taken out of the sentence so that the sentence makes sense without it, set the phrase off with commas.

Example: The miners, who went on strike, gained the support of local newspapers.

Use commas to separate items in a series.

A comma is used in between items in a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses. You may often see a series with no comma after the next-to-the-last item; however, occasionally omitting that comma can cause confusion, and you will never be wrong if you include it.

Example: My favorite foods are pizza, chocolate, and ice cream.

Use commas to set off appositives.

When an appositive (noun or noun substitute that renames a nearby noun or noun substitute) is not essential to identify what it renames, it is set off with commas.

Example: Mrs. Sanders, my childhood piano teacher, taught me to love music.

Use commas to set off contrasting elements.

Use a comma (or commas) to set off a modifying element that ends or interrupts a sentence if the modifier establishes a contrast.

Example: The government chose Texas, not Massachusetts, as the site for the project.

For more information on using commas, see

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 738-54

Writing Center Handout No. 29. "Using Commas (2)"