



The Writing Center



COMMA RULES YOU SHOULD KNOW

When it comes to making comma errors, students generally fall into one of two categories: those who avoid commas altogether and those who sprinkle commas like salt on an order of fries. Don't fall into either of these traps! Use these six rules to help you use these important punctuation marks with confidence and competence.

COMMA RULE 1: When you use a conjunction to join two complete sentences, use a comma before the conjunction. The conjunctions are for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (FANBOYS).

1. Elaine needed someone to proofread her paper, **so** Stephanie volunteered.
2. Juan has almost finished his draft, **but** Brian is still working on his.

NOTE: Be sure that the conjunctions do in fact connect two independent clauses (complete sentences). In the following sentence, the conjunction is not joining two whole sentences, so no comma is needed.

3. Marty tried to leave early **but** could not get his car started.

COMMA RULE 2: Put a comma between items in a series—a list of three or more items.

1. Dennis stopped by to turn in his prewriting, **rough draft,** **essay,** and tape.
2. Robert left a note for his roommate, **grabbed his backpack,** and headed out the door.

COMMA RULE 3: Put a comma after an introductory expression that is not part of the main subject-verb pattern. The introductory expression can be a word, a phrase, or a dependent clause.

1. **Yes,** Christina will be there.
2. **Well,** Danielle has not made up her mind.
3. **However,** Lydia and Conrad had other plans.
4. **In the middle of the class last Thursday,** Art fell asleep.
5. **Yawning widely,** Heng turned in his essay.
6. **When the students left,** the room was suddenly silent.

COMMA RULE 4: When a sentence directly addresses someone by name, separate the name from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

1. I heard, **Carlos,** that you passed your exams.
2. **Jerry,** have you finished reading Jennifer's essay?
3. I was surprised to see you at the game, **Yvette.**

NOTE: Do not separate a name from the rest of the sentence when the person discussed is absent or is not being directly addressed.

4. I heard that Carlos passed his exams.
5. Has Jerry finished reading Jennifer's essay?
6. I was surprised to see Yvette at the game.

COMMA RULE 5: Watch for transitional expressions that interrupt the flow of a sentence. These transitions include words and phrases like *however, moreover, finally, therefore, of course, and on the other hand*. Transitional words and phrases can be used in different parts of a sentence. If the transition is at the **BEGINNING of a sentence, serving as an introductory phrase, put a comma after it—see rule #3 above. If the transition is in the **MIDDLE** of a sentence and interrupts the sentence, just put a comma before and after it. If the transition comes **BETWEEN** two complete sentences, put a semi-colon before it and a comma after it (if you do not do this, you will have created a run-on or run-together sentence).**

1. **Of course**, Teri was not really surprised.
2. **However**, the others had simply not expected it.
3. Sabrina and Barbie were, **of course**, happy to be in class.
4. David, **however**, was not so sure.
5. JoJo, **on the other hand**, was already at Happy Hour.
6. Jenn won the chemistry award; **of course**, she deserved it.
7. Kim wanted to go to the party; **however**, she knew she should study.

COMMA RULE 6: Put commas around non-essential (also called nonrestrictive) material. Look especially for who or which clauses, appositives*, and participial phrases.**

1. Mark McGuire, **who plays baseball for the Saint Louis Cardinals**, set a record by hitting seventy home runs in a single season.
 2. Baseball, **which is considered our national pastime**, is a rustic sport in origin.
- *3. Toni Morrison, **winner of the National Book Award**, read from *Beloved*, her most famous novel.
- **4. Walter, **sighing loudly**, wished the film would end.