

COMMAS CHEAT SHEET

PURPOSE OF COMMAS

The comma is an important piece of punctuation that serves to separate parts of a sentence for clarity. Comma mistakes are some of the most common mistakes in English. Although the “pause rule” of adding commas whenever there’s a pause in your sentence can be a helpful rule of thumb, it is not always accurate. These rules should be followed instead.

COMPOUND SENTENCES

Commas are used in compound sentences separated by conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*, etc.) with the comma coming before the conjunction. When you make a compound sentence with a comma, don’t forget the conjunction — otherwise, you’ll create a comma splice.

EXAMPLES

Correct: It was a stormy night, and the wind howled like a pack of wolves.

Incorrect: The rain fell constantly outside, it soaked through everything.

HOWEVER

Correct: The rain fell constantly outside; it soaked through everything.

You can make a compound sentence by using a semicolon in place of the comma and leaving out the conjunction.

INTRODUCTORY PHRASES/CLAUSES/TRANSITIONS

Commas are used to separate introductory material from the main part of the sentence. They come after introductory prepositional phrases, adverb clauses, and transitional expressions like *however*, *therefore*, and *moreover*.

EXAMPLES

Correct: While water is crucial to human body function, juice tastes better.

Correct: On the other hand, juice is not as hydrating as water.

Incorrect: Moreover, water is much easier than juice to find in the wild.

BETWEEN ADJECTIVES

Commas are used between multiple coordinate adjectives preceding a noun. Only insert a comma between adjectives that could instead be separated by *and*.

EXAMPLES

Correct: Kevin was a hardened, ruthless manager.

Incorrect: Two, tiny kittens crawled out of the box.

It would not make sense to say “two *and* tiny kittens,” so the adjectives are not coordinate, and the comma does not belong here.

SERIAL/OXFORD COMMA

Commas are used to separate items in a list of three or more. The serial or Oxford comma comes before the last item in a list. Journalists and the Associated Press (AP) do not use the serial comma, but its use will always provide more clarity, not less.

EXAMPLES

Correct: Deb went to the store to buy bread, milk, and eggs.

Incorrect: “I would like to thank my loving parents, my principal and my counselor.”

Without the serial comma here, it implies that this person’s parents are their principal and counselor. If they are referencing four separate people, the serial comma is necessary.

DIRECT QUOTATIONS

Commas are used to set off direct quotations. Depending on the structure of your sentence, the comma will either come before the quote or after.

EXAMPLES

Correct: Mark Twain once said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

Correct: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education,” Mark Twain reportedly exclaimed.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Commas are used to separate nonessential information (also called parentheticals) from the bulk of the sentence. Information is supplementary if the sentence would communicate the same idea without the supplement.

EXAMPLES

Correct: There are, to be sure, three missing commas in the last paragraph.

Incorrect: No one could see the water, which was seeping into the carpet.

Removing “which was seeping into the carpet” would drastically change the idea the sentence is communicating, so it is not supplementary information and does not need a comma.

APPOSITIVES

Commas are used to set off appositives (nouns or pronouns that rename another noun or pronoun) and appositive phrases.

EXAMPLES

Correct: Many people believe George III, the king of England during the American Revolution, went insane.

Correct: My hamster, Brambleton, is a grumpy rodent.

DATES/ADDRESSES/TITLES

Commas are used in to separate the year from the month and day in dates, the city from a country or state in addresses, and a person’s title from the rest of their name.

EXAMPLES

Correct: On December 7, 1941, war planes flew over Pearl Harbor.

Correct: The author’s daughter was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1963.

Correct: Melanie Driver, PhD, wrote her dissertation on the weaknesses of forensic evidence in criminal investigations.