

## USING COMMAS (2): A WRITER'S GUIDE TO MORE OF THOSE IMPOSSIBLE RULES

№ 29 in the Writing Center Handbook Series

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.

### 1. Using commas with adverbial clauses or with *that* and *which* clauses

Adverbial clauses (*when, where, because, although, before*) are usually essential to the meaning of the sentence, so they do not need to be set off with commas unless the adverbial clause comes before an independent clause or begins with *although, even though, while*, or another conjunction expressing the idea of contrast.

EXAMPLE:

- Betty sat in the same chair when she went to the library.
- When Betty went to the library, she always sat in the same chair.
- Betty always sat in the same chair at the library, even though the chair was at the back.

*That* is always essential and is NOT set off with commas.

*Which* can be either essential or nonessential, so the comma rule will depend on the sentence.

### 2. Using commas with quotations

Use commas to set off a quotation from words used to introduce or identify its source.

EXAMPLE:

- After the play ended, *Kelly commented*, "I really enjoyed watching my friends on stage. I had no idea they were so talented."

A comma at the end of a quoted word, phrase, or sentence goes *inside* the closing quotation mark.

### 3. Using commas to set off parenthetical and transitional expressions

Because parenthetical and transitional expressions (any added comments or information) often interrupt or digress, they are usually set off with commas.

EXAMPLE:

- My dad, *of all people*, told me not to take school so seriously.

### 4. Using commas with dates, addresses, titles, and numbers

**Dates.** Use a comma between the day of the week and the month, between the day of the month and the year, and between the year and the rest of the sentence.

EXAMPLE

- On May 12, 2001, Agnes Scott College will hold graduation exercises.

**Addresses and place names.** In addresses and place-names, use a comma after each part, including the state if no ZIP code is given. A ZIP code is not preceded by a comma.

**Titles.** Use commas to set off a title such as *M.D.*, *Ph.D.*, and so on, but not with *Jr.* and *Sr.*

**Numbers.** In numbers of 5 or more digits, use a comma between each group of 3 digits, starting from the right.

### 5. Checking for unnecessary commas

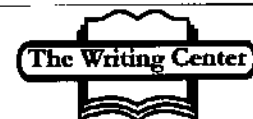
With all these rules telling you when to use a comma, be careful not to go comma crazy. Too many commas can ruin an otherwise fine sentence.

EXAMPLE OF WHAT NOT TO DO:

- In my school, I participated, by playing soccer, at the position, of a midfielder.

For more information on this topic, see:

*The New St. Martin's Handbook's* section on commas  
pages 460-479.



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