

USING COMMAS (1): A WRITER'S GUIDE TO THOSE IMPOSSIBLE RULES

No. 28 in the Writing Center Handout 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 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.
- *To avoid answering the teacher's question*, I sunk into my chair.

2. Using commas 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.

3. Using 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.

4. Using 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.

EXAMPLE:

- My favorite foods are *pizza, chocolate, and ice cream*.

(You may often see a series with no comma after the next-to-the-last item. Occasionally, however, omitting that comma can cause confusion, and you will never be wrong if you include it.)

5. Using 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.

6. Using 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 this topic, see

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



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