

COMMAS, COMMAS AND MORE COMMAS:

Commas help your reader figure out which words go together in a sentence and which parts of your sentences are most important. Using commas incorrectly may confuse the reader, signal ignorance of writing rules, or indicate carelessness. Although using commas may have seemed mysterious before, using them correctly is easy if you follow a few guidelines.

Beware of popular myths of comma usage:

- A really long sentence may be perfectly correct without commas. The length of a sentence does not determine whether or not you need a comma.
- Where you pause or breathe in a sentence does not reliably indicate where a comma belongs. Different readers pause or breathe in different places.

You can use the following procedures to help test your writing for common comma errors. Read through an essay you have written and look at each comma. If none of the five situations described in this handout apply, you probably don't need one at all.

You probably already know at least one of the following five guidelines and just have to practice the others. These guidelines are basically all you need to know; if you learn them once, you're set for all but the most unusual situations.

Introductory Phrases (Small, medium and large)

Setting off introductory phrases with a comma lets the reader know that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. There are basically three kinds of introductory phrases: small, medium, and large ones.

There are small (just one word) introductory phrases:

Generally, extraterrestrials are friendly and helpful.
Moreover, some will knit booties for you if you ask nicely.

There are medium introductory phrases (often 2-3 word, prepositional phrases):

In fact, Godzilla is just a misunderstood teen lizard of giant proportions.
On the other hand, Bert and Ernie are known to have worked closely with Hitler.

There are large introductory phrases (more than 3 words). You can often spot these large phrases by key words/groups such as *although*, *if*, *as*, *in order to*, and *when*:

If you discover that you feel nauseated, then you know you've tried my Clam Surprise.
As far as I am concerned, it is the best dish for dispatching unwanted guests.

FANBOYS is a handy mnemonic device for remembering the coordinating conjunctions: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So. You should always have a comma before **FANBOYS** that join two complete thoughts (with two subjects and two verbs).

She wore a pink hat, but she didn't wear a pink dress.
My hamster loved to play, so I gave him a wheel to run on.

If you do not have two subjects and two verbs separated by the **FANBOYS**, you do not need to insert the comma before the **FANBOYS**. In other words, if the second grouping of words isn't a complete thought, don't use a comma:

She wore a pink hat but didn't wear a pink dress.
My hamster loved to play and often ate marshmallows.

THE DREADED COMMA SPLICE:

If you don't have **FANBOYS** between the two complete and separate thoughts, using a comma alone causes a "comma splice" or "fused sentence" (some instructors may call it a run-on). Others (especially professors) will think of this as a serious error.

BAD: My hamster loved to play, I gave him a hula-hoop.

ALSO BAD: You wore a lovely hat, it was your only defense.

To fix these comma splices, you can do one of three things: just add **FANBOYS**, change the comma to a semicolon, or make each clause a separate sentence.

GOOD: You wore a lovely hat, for it was your only defense.

ALSO GOOD: You wore a lovely hat; it was your only defense.

STILL GOOD: You wore a lovely hat. It was your only defense.

FANBOY FAKERS:

However, therefore, moreover, and other words like them are *not* **FANBOYS** (they are called "conjunctive adverbs"). They are really small introductory phrases that begin the second complete thought in a long sentence. When you want to use one of these words in the middle of a sentence, check to see if you have a complete thought on both sides of the "conjunctive adverb". If you do, then you need a semicolon after the first complete thought and a comma after the small introductory phrase in the second complete thought.

GOOD: Basketball is my favorite sport; however, table tennis is where I excel.

BAD: Basketball is my favorite sport, however, table tennis is where I excel.

Another option is to break the two parts of the long sentence into two separate sentences.

X, Y AND Z:

Put commas between items in a list except for the last item in the list.

You can buy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in Los Angeles.

DESCRIBERS:

If you have two or more adjectives (words that describe) that are *not* joined by a conjunction (usually *and*) and both adjectives modify the same word, put a comma between them.

He was a bashful, dopey, sleepy dwarf.

The frothy, radiant princess kissed the putrid, vile frog.

INTERRUPTERS:

Two commas can be used to set off additional information that appears within the sentence but is separate from the primary subject and verb of the sentence. These commas help your reader figure out your main point by telling them that the words within the commas are not necessary to understand the rest of the sentence. In other words, you should be able to take out the section framed by commas and still have a complete and clear sentence.

Bob Mills, a sophomore from Raleigh, was the only North Carolinian native at the Japanese food festival in Cary.

Aaron thought he could see the future, not the past, in the wrinkles on his skin.