



Commas

There are four major uses of commas.

1. To set off independent clauses that are linked with a coordinating conjunction or a pair of correlative conjunctions.

- The House approved the bill, but the Senate rejected it.
- Either the hard drive is full, or the modem is too slow.

2. To set off items in a series.

- Chipmunk, raccoon, and Mugwump are Native American words.
- You may pay by check, with a credit card, or in cash.
- Brazilians speak Portuguese, Colombians speak Spanish, and Haitians speak French and Creole.

3. To set off introductory elements.

- **Dependent Clauses**
-Although the CIA used to call undercover agents penetration agents, they now routinely refer to them as moles.
- **Verbal and Prepositional Phrases**
-Thinking this might be his last chance, Scott struggled toward the South Pole. (*participial phrase*)
-To write well, one must read a lot. (*infinitive phrase*)
-During the Depression, movie attendance rose. (*prepositional phrase*).

4. To set off nonessential material.

- **Nonrestrictive Modifiers**
-Adjective clauses: He ran for the bus, which was late as usual.
-Prepositional phrases: The clerk, with a nod, dismissed me.
-Verbal phrases: The marathoner, running his fastest, beat his previous record.
-Appositives: Citizen Kane, Orson Welles' first film, made him famous.

For more information, please see the 4th edition of *The Brief Handbook* pages 382-391.

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- **Transitional words and phrases**

Examples:

-The Outward Bound program₁ for example₂ is extremely safe.

-Other programs are not so safe₂ however.

- **Contradictory phrases**

Examples:

-This medicine is taken after meals₁ never on an empty stomach.

-Mark McGwire₁ not Sammy Sosa₂ was the first to break Roger Maris' home run record.

- **Absolute phrases**

Examples:

-His fear increasing₁ he waited to enter the haunted house.

-Many soldiers were lost in Southeast Asia₁ their bodies never recovered.

Commas are also used...

- With direct quotations
- With titles or degrees following a name
- In addresses and dates
- To prevent misreading

But commas should NOT be used... (see pgs. 389-391 in The Brief Handbook for examples)

- To set off restrictive modifiers
- Between inseparable grammatical constructions
- Between a verb and an indirect quotation or indirect question
- In compounds that are not composed of independent clauses
- Before a dependent clause at the end of a sentence

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