

SSU Writing Center

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COMMAS

Commas give all writers grief. They have several proper uses, and within those proper uses there are different comma “styles.” Writers can use commas creatively to emphasize different elements of sentences, and “real” writers frequently bend or break the rules that grammar handbooks suggest we follow. However, there are still basic rules that are normally observed in standard edited American English.

One rule you might have heard goes something like this: “put a comma where you pause or take a breath.” Like all handy suggestions, this one works *sometimes*. Other times it can lead you astray. Better to rely on four pretty infallible rules:

Commas Set Off Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

Bitten by a rattlesnake, Johnny asked Lassie to go get help.

Slowly and silently, the Starship Enterprise moved into the repair dock in the space station.

Unfortunately, we lost all our money playing slots following our wedding at the Elvis Chapel.

Commas Separate Complete Sentences Joined by a Coordinating Conjunction (and, but, or)

We went to Disneyland, but the lines were so long that we couldn’t go on a single good ride.

The football was perfectly thrown, and Rice made a clean catch in the end zone.

Commas Set Off “Interruptive” Material when the Material Is *Not* Essential to the Meaning of the Sentence (i.e., non-restrictive)

Note that in these cases you often need two commas working together, just exactly in the same way as you use two parentheses:

I watched in horror as my friend, who had formerly been as quiet and peaceful as a dove, turned into a snarling, ravening werewolf.

Mary’s ice cream, which had always seemed pretty precariously perched on the cone, finally tumbled to the ground with a splat.

It had been a glorious day, one which would remain forever vibrant in my memory.

The peace treaty, a lost cause if ever there was one, became itself a casualty of the war.

Note that “interruptive” material that *is* essential to the meaning of the sentence (i.e., restrictive) does not take commas

The house which stood on the corner was the one that exploded.

Commas Are Used to Separate Three or More Items in a Series

Note that the items in a series are oftentimes single separate words, but not always. They can also be phrases, clauses--even whole sentences. Do strive to keep the items in the series grammatically parallel.

“Liberty, equality, fraternity” was the rallying cry of the French Revolution.

The cross-country runners raced over the railroad track, across the meadow, and into the trees.

John was out of Mary’s life, the apartment was vacated, the car was paid up, and life just seemed like it was getting better and better.

I really believe that there are only three legitimate flavors of ice cream: vanilla, vanilla, and vanilla.

Commas Separate Dialogue from Tag Phrases--but only if there’s no other punctuation. Note the difference between these two examples:

“I hear you loud and clear,” said the voice from the control tower.

“Are you going to eat that?” asked the man at the next table.

Brief Quiz----Commas

Add appropriate commas in the following sentences:

1. My car which was usually a good car broke down on the side of the highway.
2. To be quite honest about it that cat has been known to get stuck up in trees for hours.
3. Whenever I hear anyone talking about rock n' roll music I feel an urge to get up and dance.
4. While I was sitting on the grass the sun began to slowly fade away behind the hills.
5. On our shopping list we had to buy eggs milk flour sugar ice cream bread and chips.
6. As the fireworks brightened her mood she began to sing the Star Spangled Banner.
7. Because California is becoming more polluted everyday environmentalists are trying to do something about it.
8. While swimming in the lake Sue asked her friend to throw her the goggles and flippers.
9. Unable to detect the problem alone I asked my sister for help.
10. "Watch out for the tree" called out Sam's mother.
11. My dogs names are Scooter Tuff and Lu-Lu.
12. Jean's dog which is named Casey likes to chase cats and birds.
13. I saw you yesterday but I did not want to say hi because you were talking to Andrea and Robert.
14. The table was perfectly clean but then came the toddling baby with dirty hands.