

Commas

Derived from the Greek “koptein,” which means “a cut.”

RULE NO. 1: CLARITY RULES

RULE NO. 2: Use a comma only when you can defend its use.

“The main reason for punctuating a sentence is to clarify its structure and prevent misreading. ... When you have trouble getting the commas right, chances are you’re trying to patch up a poorly structured sentence. Instead of using punctuation marks as Band-Aids, you’d do better to perform some basic surgery.”

– “*Line by Line*” by Claire Kehrwald Cook

Commas, like everything else, must have a reason for their existence. Their purpose, however, is not to satisfy a writer’s whim – a presumed pause, a little physical distance or a pretty squiggle to dress up a sentence. If you don’t have a reason to use a comma, don’t. Here are some of the more common reasons to use commas, with many examples pulled directly from the AP Stylebook’s Punctuation Guide.



SERIES: Do not use the serial comma, which is a comma after the penultimate item in a series. Some style guides prefer the serial comma; AP does not.

The flag is red, white and blue.

BUT: *I had orange juice, toast, and ham and eggs. (internal conjunction)*

BUT: *The main points to consider are whether the athletes are skillful enough to compete, whether they have the stamina to endure the training, and whether they have the proper attitude. (complex)*

EQUAL ADJECTIVES: Use a comma if you can substitute and for the comma.

He had a thoughtful, precise manner.

She lived on a dark, dangerous street.

BUT: *He bought her a cheap fur coat.*

NONESSENTIAL CLAUSES AND PHRASES

He adored his brother, Tommy.

Because he has only one brother, it’s NONESSENTIAL
that you know his name to know whom he’s talking about.

BUT: *He adored his brother Tommy (... and despised his brother Harry).*

Because he has more than one brother, it’s ESSENTIAL
that you know his name to know which brother he’s talking about.

Students, who don’t read the stylebook, should be lashed 20 times with a wet newspaper.

Because this is an insult to all students, the stylebook reference is NONESSENTIAL.

BUT: *Students who don’t read the stylebook should be lashed 20 times with a wet newspaper.*

This insults particular students. The stylebook reference is ESSENTIAL to the meaning of the sentence.

INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES AND PHRASES

When he had tired of the mad pace of San Francisco, he moved to Sausalito.

BUT: *On deadline he was busy. (simple)*

CONJUNCTIONS

We are visiting Washington, and we also plan to see our senator.

The subject “we” is repeated in both parts of the sentence.

BUT: *We are visiting Washington and plan to see our senator.*

Subject is used in only the first part; the second part cannot stand alone.

INTRODUCING DIRECT QUOTES

Sam said, “She spent six months in Argentina.”

BEFORE ATTRIBUTION

“Bring me some coffee,” he demanded.

But: *“Why should I?” I replied.*

But: *“Hell no!” I replied.*

HOMETOWN, STATES, AGES AND DATES: The commas that set off hometowns, states, ages and dates are a kind of parentheses: “She went to Athens, Ohio, for the journalism workshop” is like saying “She went to Athens (which is in Ohio, by the way) for the journalism conference.” You wouldn’t drop the closing parenthesis, so don’t drop the closing comma.

Mary Richards of Minneapolis, Minn., attended the seminar June 22, 2002, with Deborah Gump, 93, Athens, Ohio; Rhoda Morgenstern, 31, New York, N.Y.; and Ted Baxter, 31, St. Paul, Minn.

NAMES OF STATES/NATIONS WITH CITIES

His journey takes him from Dublin, Ireland, to Fargo, N.D., and back.

DIRECT ADDRESS

Mother, shall I attack the lady in the shower?

SEPARATING SIMILAR WORDS

What the comma confusion is, is not clear.

**** COMMAS ALWAYS, ALWAYS GO INSIDE QUOTE MARKS. ****

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