

Commas in a Series

When you have three or more items in a series, you must include a comma after every item up to the next to the last. Your elements in the series should be in parallel form: all the same parts of speech, same type of phrase, or the same type of clause.

One Word Items in a Series

1. The fall foliage decorated the mountain side with beautiful reds, yellows, oranges, and browns.
2. The children jumped, ran, and hopped around the playground.

Note that in each of the above examples, the members in the series are members of the same figure of speech. In the first example, the adjectives are all plural. Likewise, in the second sentence, the verbs are all past tense and all active verbs.

You may also find clauses or phrases included in series.

1. While his goals were honorable, the project failed because he refused to take into consideration the specific culture of the people, the lack of participation from the university, the limited amount of funds, or the extreme distance from his home.

Note: When you use a list, you must make certain that all the members of the list grammatically fit in the sentence. In the above sentence, all of the members of the list must complete the clause he failed to take into consideration:

He failed to take into consideration the specific culture of the people

He failed to take into consideration the lack of participation from the university

He failed to take into consideration the limited amount of funds

He failed to take into consideration the extreme distance he would have to travel.

If the items in your series include clauses that contain punctuation, you should use semicolons between the elements in the series in order to avoid confusing the reader.

1. In order to be successful in college, the students must read their assignments, take notes in their classes, and attend class regularly; they must form, maintain, and expand their support systems; and they must get plenty of exercise, rest, and nutrition.

Note: In the above example: each of the phrases contains a series in which the members of the series are separated by commas; in order to avoid confusion, notice the writer's use of the semicolon after each phrase.

2. Doris Smith, a homemaker from Winslow; John Doe, a tractor retailer from Benton; and Harold Law, a preacher from Tupelo attended the reunion.



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Note: In the example above, each of the members of the series has a comma that follows with additional information, so the writer uses semicolons in this sentence to avoid confusion.