



Introduction to Correct Comma Usage

In Modern American usage, the rules that apply to commas are very specific. Following those rules will ensure that your messages are not misunderstood and that you maintain your credibility as a writer.

- A. Commas are used for the following reasons:
- a. To offset an introductory element from the rest of the sentence
 - **Example:** In this sentence, the introductory clause is the first three words.
 - b. To separate two independent clauses separated by a coordinating conjunction (e.g., for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)
 - c. To divide items in a series
 - **Example:** This sentence has a subject, a verb, and a direct object.
 - d. To set apart non-essential elements (clauses and phrases) from independent clauses
 - **Example:** In this sentence, I placed a comma after the introductory clause
 - e. To separate compound adjectives
 - **Example:** I prefer low-priced, mass-market paperbacks to hardback books
 - f. To offset parenthetical and transitional expressions
 - **Example:** These expressions, which students use excessively, bore readers
 - g. Commas are used to offset contrasting elements, participles, interjections, direct addresses, and tag questions
 - **Example:** Jim listens, but not well.
 - **Example:** Jim, listening closely, understood my objections.
 - **Example:** No, Jim does not listen well.
 - **Example:** Jim, you have to listen to me.
 - **Example:** You will listen, right?
 - h. Commas are used with dates, addresses, titles, and numbers
 - See the “How do I use commas correctly?” tip sheet for additional tips
 - i. Commas are used in quotations.
 - See the “Using end punctuation and quotations correctly” tip sheet
- B. Unnecessary comma usage will distract, annoy, and confuse your readers. Using commas excessively will interrupt the flow and logic of your sentences.
- a. Do not use a single comma between the subject and verb
 - b. Do not use a comma to offset a restrictive element.
 - c. Do not use a comma between two independent clauses that are not separated by a coordinating conjunction.
 - d. Do not use a comma to separate an independent clause and a dependent clause separated by a coordinating conjunction.
 - e. Do not use a comma before the first or the last item in a series.

Do not mistake commas with breaths – in short, do not always choose comma placement based on whether you have to take a breath while reading the sentence aloud. Doing so is a decent rule of thumb for most cases, but you should always rely on the rules given above.