



The Elusive / Often Abused Comma

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To comma, or not to comma, that is the question! Take a Look...

The comma was invented to help readers. Without it, sentence parts can collide into one another unexpectedly, causing misreadings.

Confusing: If you cook Elmer will do the dishes.

Correction: If you cook, Elmer will do the dishes.

To avoid confusion, here are some rules to follow:

- Use a comma **before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.**
 - ◆ There are seven coordinating conjunctions in English: *and, but, or, nor, for, so,* and *yet*.
 - Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.
- Use a comma **after an introductory word group.**
 - When air-conditioning arrived in the workplace, it increased productivity significantly.
- Use a comma **between all items in a series.**
 - Anne Frank and thousands like her were forced to hide in attics, cellars, and secret rooms.
- Use a comma **between coordinate adjectives.**
 - ◆ Coordinate adjectives separately modify a noun and can be connected with the word *and*.
 - Patients with severe, irreversible brain damage should not be put on life support systems.

- Use a comma **to set off transitional expressions.**
 - ◆ A transitional expression serves as a bridge between sentences or parts of sentences. The expressions include conjunctive adverbs such as *however*, *therefore*, and *moreover* and transitional phrases such as *for example* and *as a matter of fact*. When these expressions appear between independent clauses in a compound sentence, they are preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma.
 - Mandy did not understand our language; moreover, she was unfamiliar with our customs.
 - Natural foods are not always salt free; celery, for example, contains more sodium than most people would imagine.
- Use a comma **to set off parenthetical expressions.**
 - Parenthetical expressions are those that interrupt the flow of a sentence.
 - Evolution, so far as we know, does not work this way.
- Use a comma **to set off absolute phrases.**
 - An absolute phrase modifies the whole sentence.
 - Our grant having been approved, we were at last able to begin the archaeological dig.
- Use a comma **to set off contrasted elements, which are sharp contrasts beginning with words such as *not* and *unlike*.**
 - The Epicurean philosophers sought mental, not bodily, pleasures.
- Use a comma **to set off nouns of direct address, the words *yes* and *no*, interrogative tags, and mild interjections.**
 - Forgive us, Dr. Spock, for spanking Brian.
 - Yes, the loan will probably be approved.
 - The film was faithful to the book, wasn't it?
 - Ah, I understand.
- Use a comma **to set off direct quotations introduced with expressions such as *he said*.**
 - Naturalist Arthur Bent remarked, "The peregrine declined unnoticed because it is not adorable."
- Use a comma **with dates, addresses and titles.**
 - On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of the suspect.
 - Greg lived at 708 Spring Street, Washington, Illinois 61571.
 - Sandra Barnes, M.D., performed the surgery.