Commas

Most of us had teachers in elementary school who told us to put commas wherever we’d naturally pause or take a breath if we were reading our writing out loud. Those teachers probably meant well (and sometimes that technique happens to work) but now that you’re in college, writing serious academic papers, it’s time to learn the true rules—and learn how to apply them.

Rules of Comma Use

Use a comma in the following situations (rules are in no particular order of importance):

1. After introductory material
2. With a coordinating conjunction to join 2 or more complete sentences
3. To set off parenthetical information
4. To separate 3 or more items in a list
5. To separate 2 or more coordinate adjectives that both describe the same noun
6. To set off quotations of direct speech
7. To set off geographical names, parts of dates and addresses, and people’s titles
8. To set off interjections and direct address

Rule 1: After Introductory Material

Sentences often begin with a word, phrase, or clause that introduces (or “sets the stage for”) everything else that’s going to follow. This introductory material should be set off by a comma.

Examples
Strangely enough, none of the students who requested the extra study session actually showed up for it.

After the exam, Greg went straight home and slept for 12 hours.

Even though some people find her offensive, Lady Gaga has been named the new “Queen of Pop.”
When I drive home from work, I often see foxes trot across the road just a street over from my house.

Because it's her birthday on Saturday, we're going to Banff!

**Rule 2: With A Coordinating Conjunction**

The comma is an amazingly useful piece of punctuation within sentences, and if we didn’t have commas, we’d lose a lot of clarity and therefore meaning. However, a comma is not ever strong enough by itself to go between, or to connect, 2 or more independent clauses (equivalent to complete sentences).

So if you have the equivalent of one full sentence (that could stand by itself) on one side of a comma and the equivalent of another full sentence (that could stand by itself) on the other side, you must add a coordinating conjunction (AND, BUT, OR, NOR, FOR, SO, YET) or you'll have a comma splice. (Comma splices are bad. Instructors hate them. Try to avoid them.)

**Examples**

Andrew wanted to do well on the exam, so he studied harder than ever before.

I would love to be able to afford a vacation, but I have to save my money for school.

Maggie might complete a collaborative B.A. degree at RDC, or she might go straight to the University of Calgary.

**Rule 3: To Set Off Parenthetical Information**

Use commas to set off words, phrases, or clauses that add information to your sentence but don’t have to be there! You can take them out, and your sentence will still make sense grammatically (even if it loses some of its strength and flavour).

**Examples**

This morning, I spilled coffee, my usual extra-large double double, all over the front seat of my car.

My favourite novel by Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit, isn’t on the shelf.
She insisted, grinning mischievously, that she didn’t know where my water bottle was.

Tom, my oldest brother, works in the oilfield.

Gwynne Dyer, who came to RDC in 2011, spoke on political conditions in the Middle East.

Be careful with this rule. Sometimes a phrase will be needed to specify which thing or person you are talking about. In that case, do not use commas to set the phrase off.

**Examples**
The guy studying at the table over there is my cousin. (The phrase “studying at the table over there” is needed to specify which guy; therefore, no commas are used.)

The speaker who came two weeks ago is the one I chose for my paper. (There have been several speakers. Therefore, there is a need to specify that it is the speaker who came two weeks ago that was chosen.)

My brother who works in the oilfield is coming to visit me next Friday. (Because I have more than one brother, I need to specify that it is my brother who works in the oilfield who is going to visit me. However, if I had only one brother, I would have to put commas around “who works in the oilfield.”)

**Rule 4: To Separate 3 or More Items In A List**

Commas allow you to clearly and distinctly separate 3 or more items, verbs, phrases, or clauses in a list.

**Examples**
Yesterday, we ordered a primo vegetarian pizza, a taco pizza, and a Caesar salad from Panago. (Here commas are used to separate a list of items.)

I enjoyed hiking, biking, and canoeing on our fantastic trip this summer. (Here commas are used to separate another list of items, specifically activities in this case.)

He came to class, listened attentively, and took notes. (Here commas are used to separate a list of verbs.)
Did you look on the coffee table, under the couch, or between the couch cushions? (Here commas are used to separate more than two phrases in a list.)

We’re late because we didn’t have a map, there was no one to ask at the desk, and my cell phone was dead. (Here commas are used to separate a list of clauses.)

What topic I chose, why I chose it, and how I presented it are questions that I must answer in this reflection. (Here commas again are used to separate a list of clauses.)

**Rule 5: To Separate 2 or More Coordinate Adjectives That Both Describe the Same Noun**

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives that have equal weight/significance in describing a noun. You can determine whether adjectives are coordinate by asking yourself the following questions:

- Will the sentence still make sense if the adjectives are reversed?
- Will the sentence make sense if you put the word “and” between the adjectives?

If you answer yes to these questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma.

**Examples**

Ominous, burly clouds sulked up unnoticed. (coordinate)

She was a happy, generous child. (coordinate)

He disliked the itchy wool sweater his aunt gave him, but he still wore it. (non-coordinate)

They lived in a rustic log cabin. (non-coordinate)
Rule 6: To Set Off Quotations of Direct Speech

Use a comma to show where direct speech is about to begin, where direct speech has ended before the sentence is finished, or where direct speech is broken up by another part of the sentence.

Examples
Pulling back the curtain, the child peeked through the window, swung excitedly around, and exclaimed, “She’s here!”

“Everyone interested in the model UN should come see me after class,” the professor told his students.

The company president stood up, walked over to the microphone, and said, “Welcome to our seventh annual celebration.”

“I want to understand,” Kelly explained, “so I can work through these calculus problems when you’re not here to help me.”

Rule 7: To Set off Geographical Names, Parts of Dates and Addresses, And People’s Titles

Use a comma to set off the names of cities and provinces, territories, or states. Note that there should be a comma after the province, territory, or state name if it appears anywhere but the end of the sentence.

Examples
She grew up in Benalto, Alberta, but moved to Iqaluit, Nunavut, last year.

Their layovers were in Atlanta, Georgia, and Austin, Texas.

In a mailing address, use a comma between the city and the province, territory, or state. However, you don’t need a comma after the province, territory, or state.

Example
Mrs. Smith
49 Pierview Crescent
Timbalto, California 20486-9908
USA
In a mailing address written out in a sentence rather than on an envelope, put another comma between the street and the city.

**Example**
My new address is 1469 Rolling Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta P6Q 4L9.

For a date, use a comma after the day of the week, the day of the month, and the year.

**Examples**
On Tuesday, October 7, 1999, she landed in Berlin, Germany.


Use commas to set off a person’s title.

**Examples**
Joel Ward, President of Red Deer College, spoke about the new five-year strategic plan.

Dr. MacKendrick, Chief of Surgery, recommended some procedural changes in the neurosurgery division.

**Rule 8: To Set Off Interjections and Direct Address**

Use a comma or a pair of commas to set off interjections (interjections are simple words that carry emotional meaning like yes, no, aha, gee, uh, etc.) Also, use a comma or a pair of commas when addressing someone directly.

**Examples**
No, Elizabeth, I can’t go with you Saturday because I have an appointment at the dentist’s.

These are excellent cookies, Grandma.

Uh, I can’t remember what he told us. Maybe Allison knows.

“Students, you must pay attention,” the grade five teacher insisted.

I wrote the rough draft yesterday, yes, but I still need to rewrite it.

“I’m all done, Teacher,” the kindergartener proudly announced.