

(last updated 5/17/16)

Do you use more commas than you need because someone taught you to insert a comma every place you might pause in reading your paper aloud? Be careful when using that rule. It doesn't always work because different people may pause in different places. In the situations listed below, examples show correct comma usage in academic writing.<sup>1</sup>

## A. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses (in other words, complete sentences) linked by a coordinating conjunction.<sup>2</sup>

These conjunctions include the following joining words: (remember the acronym FANBOYS): <b>For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So.</b>	I knew she was married, <b>but</b> I did not realize that she already had three children!
<b>Exception:</b> You may omit the comma when the clauses are short. Check with your professor to see if they agree with this rule.	Many are called <b>but</b> few are chosen.
<b>Important tip:</b> Only omit the comma if you're dealing with a complete sentence.	<b>WRONG: <u>The dog, and the cat are howling.</u></b> <b>NOTE:</b> Unless both structures are complete sentences, you should NOT use a comma.

## B. Use commas to set off fragments that describe nouns when the phrases and clauses are not definitive.

<b>DEFINITIVE</b> means the group of words describing a noun answers the question "which one?" <b>Don't use commas with definitive elements.</b> <b>NOT DEFINITIVE</b> means that the information contained in the group of words does not narrow the identity of the noun to one particular person, place, thing, or category of persons, places, or things. <b>Use commas with elements that are not definitive.</b>	<b>DEFINITIVE:</b> She understands people <i>who are blunt</i> . <b>NOTE:</b> The clause "who are blunt" tells us which particular kind of people she understands.  <b>NOT DEFINITIVE:</b> Elise, who teaches French, speaks three other languages fluently. <b>NOTE:</b> The clause isn't needed to identify Elise; her identity has already been established by her name.
At times, deciding whether an element is <b>definitive</b> or <b>not definitive</b> depends on the meaning you want to convey.	<b>DEFINITIVE:</b> My aunt <i>who lives in Bolivia</i> has a spunky personality. <b>NOTE:</b> The writer has many aunts, but the one to whom she is referring lives in Bolivia. <b>NOT DEFINITIVE:</b> My aunt, <i>who lives in Bolivia</i> , has a spunky personality. <b>NOTE:</b> The speaker is referring to her only aunt, who, by the way, lives in Bolivia.

<sup>1</sup> Form and content in this tipsheet were adopted from the following source:

Aaron, Jane E. *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For further information in this type of sentence structure, see tipsheet on Run-Ons and Comma Splices.

<p><b>Tips for applying the definitive/ not definitive comma rule:</b> Identify the element. In other words, does it answer the question “which one?” If NO, use commas. If YES, leave out the commas.</p>	<p>The state of Utah, <i>which contains many famous national parks</i>, has numerous desert areas. <b>NOTE:</b> The italicized clause is just added information. It is not needed to answer the question “which Utah?”; thus, the commas are correct.</p>
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**C. Set off most introductory fragments with a comma.**

<p>Introductory elements that should be set off with a comma usually begin with -ing constructions or with clauses that start with words such as <i>after, although, as, because, even though, if, since, and when</i>.</p>	<p><b>As the sun rose</b>, I ate my breakfast. <b>Eating my breakfast</b>, I watched the sun rise. <b>In the distant horizon</b>, the sun rose. <b>Of course</b>, she ate her breakfast while watching the sunrise.</p>
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**D. Separate items in a list or series with commas.**

<p>Items in a series need to total at least three for this comma rule to apply.</p>	<p><b>NO COMMAS NEEDED:</b> Toasted bread and grilled onions make for a low budget lunch.  <b>COMMAS NEEDED:</b> Toasted bread, grilled onions, and Swiss cheese make for a low budget lunch.</p>
<p><b>Exception:</b> In journalism, it is common for reporters to omit the last comma in the series. However, academic writers should include the last comma.</p>	<p><b>JOURNALISTIC EXCEPTION:</b> Toasted bread, grilled onions and Swiss cheese make for a low budget lunch.</p>

**E. Separate coordinating adjectives.**

<p>Separate descriptive adjectives that could be separated with the word <i>and</i>.</p>	<p>The young toddler’s <i>frail, delicate</i> hands slipped easily into the cookie jar.</p>
<p><b>“And” Test and Reversal Test:</b> - Ask if the adjectives can be reversed without changing meaning. - Ask if the word <i>and</i> can be inserted between the adjectives. If you answer “yes” to either question, the adjectives should be separated by a comma.</p>	<p>My grandmother’s <i>wild wiry</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. My grandmother’s <i>wiry wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. My grandmother’s <i>wiry and wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it. YES: This sentence needs a comma: My grandmother’s <i>wiry, wild</i> hair has a unique beauty to it.</p>

**F. Set off dates with years and complex addresses and place names with commas.**

<p>When these items appear in sentences, you should set them off with commas as shown in the right box.</p>	<p>On <i>June 12, 2009</i>, I arrived in <i>Cedar City, Utah</i>, from <i>Ft. Lauderdale, Florida</i>.</p>
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