

Using commas before *and* or *but*

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses.

When a coordinating conjunction connects two or more independent clauses — word groups that could stand alone as separate sentences — a comma must precede it. There are seven coordinating conjunctions in English: *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*.

A comma tells readers that one independent clause has come to a close and that another is about to begin.

- ▶ Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance.

EXCEPTION: If the two independent clauses are short and there is no danger of misreading, the comma may be omitted.

The plane took off and we were on our way.

TIP: As a rule, do *not* use a comma to separate coordinate word groups that are not independent clauses.

- ▶ A good money manager controls expenses and invests surplus dollars to meet future needs.

The word group following *and* is not an independent clause; it is the second half of a compound predicate.

Use a comma between all items in a series.

When three or more items are presented in a series, those items should be separated from one another with commas. Items in a series may be single words, phrases, or clauses.

- ▶ Bubbles of air, leaves, ferns, bits of wood, and insects are often found trapped in amber.

Although some writers view the comma between the last two items as optional, most experts advise using the comma because its omission can result in ambiguity or misreading.

- ▶ Uncle David willed me all of his property, houses, and warehouses.

Did Uncle David will his property *and* houses *and* warehouses — or simply his property, consisting of houses and warehouses? If the former meaning is intended, a comma is necessary to prevent ambiguity.

- ▶ The activities include a search for lost treasure, dubious financial dealings, much discussion of ancient heresies, and midnight orgies.

Without the comma, the activities seem to include discussing orgies, not participating in them. The comma makes it clear that *midnight orgies* is a separate item in the series.