

Using commas with introductory elements

Clauses and phrases

The most common introductory word groups are clauses and phrases functioning as adverbs. Such word groups usually tell when, where, how, why, or under what conditions the main action of the sentence occurred.

A comma tells readers that the introductory clause or phrase has come to a close and that the main part of the sentence is about to begin.

- ▶ When Irwin was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.

Without the comma, readers may have Irwin ironing his cat. The comma signals that *his cat* is the subject of a new clause, not part of the introductory one.

- ▶ Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, the park rangers discovered an abandoned mine.

The comma tells readers that the introductory prepositional phrase has come to a close.

EXCEPTION: The comma may be omitted after a short adverb clause or phrase if there is no danger of misreading.

In no time we were at 2,800 feet.

Sentences also frequently begin with participial phrases describing the noun or pronoun immediately following them. The comma tells readers that they are about to learn the identity of the person or thing described; therefore, the comma is usually required even when the phrase is short.

- ▶ Thinking his motorcade drive through Dallas was routine, President Kennedy smiled and waved at the crowds.

- ▶ Buried under layers of younger rocks, the earth's oldest rocks contain no fossils.

Other introductory word groups include transitional expressions and absolute phrases.

Transitional expressions

Transitional expressions serve as bridges between sentences or parts of sentences. They include conjunctive adverbs such as *however*, *therefore*, and *moreover* and transitional phrases such as *for example*, *as a matter of fact*, and *in other words*.

When a transitional expression appears between independent clauses in a compound sentence, it is preceded by a semicolon and is usually followed by a comma.

- ▶ Minh did not understand our language; moreover, he was unfamiliar with our customs.

(continued)

When a transitional expression appears at the beginning of a sentence or in the middle of an independent clause, it is usually set off with commas.

- ▶ As a matter of fact, American football was established by fans who wanted to play a more organized game of rugby.
- ▶ Natural foods are not always salt free; celery, for example, contains more sodium than most people would imagine.

EXCEPTION: If a transitional expression blends smoothly with the rest of the sentence, calling for little or no pause in reading, it does not need to be set off with a comma. Expressions such as *also*, *at least*, *certainly*, *consequently*, *indeed*, *of course*, *moreover*, *no doubt*, *perhaps*, *then*, and *therefore* do not always call for a pause.

Alice's bicycle is broken; *therefore* you will need to borrow Sue's.

NOTE: The conjunctive adverb *however* always calls for a pause, but it should not be confused with *however* meaning “no matter how,” which does not: *However hard Bill tried, he could not match his previous record.*

Absolute phrases

An absolute phrase, which modifies the whole sentence, usually consists of a noun followed by a participle or participial phrase. Absolute phrases may appear at the beginning or at the end of a sentence. Wherever they appear, they should be set off with commas.

- ▶ The sun appearing for the first time in a week, we were at last able to begin the archaeological dig.
- ▶ Elvis Presley made music industry history in the 1950s, his records having sold more than ten million copies.

CAUTION: Do not insert a comma between the noun and the participle in an absolute construction.

- ▶ The next contestant, being five years old, the emcee adjusted the height of the microphone.