

Removing unnecessary commas

Do not use a comma between compound elements that are not independent clauses.

Though a comma should be used before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses, this rule should not be extended to other compound word groups.

- ▶ Marie Curie discovered radium/ and later applied her work on radioactivity to medicine.
- ▶ Jake still doesn't realize that his illness is serious/ and that he will have to alter his diet to improve his chances of survival.

In the first example, *and* links two verbs in a compound predicate: *discovered* and *applied*. In the second example, *and* links two subordinate clauses, each beginning with *that*.

Do not use a comma after a phrase that begins an inverted sentence.

Though a comma belongs after most introductory phrases, it does not belong after phrases that begin an inverted sentence. In an inverted sentence, the subject follows the verb, and a phrase that ordinarily would follow the verb is moved to the beginning.

- ▶ At the bottom of the hill/ sat the stubborn mule.

Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.

Though commas are required between items in a series, do not place them either before or after the whole series.

- ▶ Other causes of asthmatic attacks are/ stress, change in temperature, and cold air.
- ▶ Ironically, this job that appears so glamorous, carefree, and easy/ carries a high degree of responsibility.

Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives, between an adjective and a noun, or between an adverb and an adjective.

Commas are required between coordinate adjectives (those that can be joined with *and*), but they do not belong between cumulative adjectives (those that cannot be joined with *and*).

- ▶ In the corner of the closet we found an old/ maroon hatbox from Sears.

A comma should never be used between an adjective and the noun that follows it.

- ▶ It was a senseless, dangerous/ mission.

(continued)

Nor should a comma be used between an adverb and an adjective that follows it.

- ▶ The Hurst Home is unsuitable as a mental facility for severely/ disturbed youths.

Do not use commas to set off restrictive or mildly parenthetical elements.

Restrictive elements are modifiers or appositives that restrict the meaning of the nouns they follow. Because they are essential to the meaning of the sentence, they are not set off with commas.

- ▶ Drivers/ who think they own the road/ make cycling a dangerous sport.

The modifier *who think they own the road* restricts the meaning of *Drivers* and is therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence. Putting commas around the *who* clause falsely suggests that all drivers think they own the road.

- ▶ Margaret Mead's book/ *Coming of Age in Samoa*/ stirred up considerable controversy when it was published in 1928.

Although commas should be used with distinctly parenthetical expressions, do not use them to set off elements that are only mildly parenthetical.

- ▶ Charisse believes that the Internet is/ essentially/ a bastion of advertising.

Do not use a comma to set off a concluding adverb clause that is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

When adverb clauses introduce a sentence, they are nearly always followed by a comma. When they conclude a sentence, however, they are not set off by commas if their content is essential to the meaning of the earlier part of the sentence. Adverb clauses beginning with *after*, *as soon as*, *because*, *before*, *if*, *since*, *unless*, *until*, and *when* are usually essential.

- ▶ Don't visit Paris at the height of the tourist season/ unless you have booked hotel reservations.

Without the *unless* clause, the meaning of the sentence might at first seem broader than the writer intended.

When a concluding adverb clause is nonessential, it should be preceded by a comma. Clauses beginning with *although*, *even though*, *though*, and *whereas* are usually nonessential.

- ▶ The lecture seemed to last only a short time, although the clock said it had gone on for more than an hour.

(continued)

Do not use a comma to separate a verb from its subject or object.

A sentence should flow from subject to verb to object without unnecessary pauses. Commas may appear between these major sentence elements only when a specific rule calls for them.

- ▶ Zoos large enough to give the animals freedom to roam, are becoming more popular.

The comma should not separate the subject, *Zoos*, from the verb, *are becoming*.

- ▶ Francesca explained to him, that she was busy and would see him later.

The comma should not separate the verb, *explained*, from its object, the subordinate clause *that she was busy and would see him later*.

Avoid other common misuses of the comma.

Do not use a comma in the following situations.

AFTER A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION (*AND, BUT, OR, NOR, FOR, SO, YET*)

- ▶ Occasionally soap operas are performed live, but more often they are taped.

AFTER *SUCH AS* OR *LIKE*

- ▶ Many shade-loving plants, such as begonias, impatiens, and coleus, can add color to a shady garden.

BEFORE *THAN*

- ▶ Touring Crete was more thrilling for us than visiting the Greek islands frequented by rich Europeans.

AFTER *ALTHOUGH*

- ▶ Although the air was balmy, the water was too cold for swimming.

BEFORE A PARENTHESIS

- ▶ At Nextel Sylvia began at the bottom (with only three and a half walls and a swivel chair), but within five years she had been promoted to supervisor.

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TO SET OFF AN INDIRECT (REPORTED) QUOTATION

- ▶ Samuel Goldwyn once said/ that a verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on.

WITH A QUESTION MARK OR AN EXCLAMATION POINT

- ▶ "Why don't you try it?/" she coaxed. "You can't do any worse than the rest of us."