



Comma Rules

General Guidelines

- Commas aren't just important for grammar, but because they can change the meaning of your sentences.
- Placing a comma wherever you naturally hear a pause in a sentence is NOT a reliable way of determining where you need a comma.
- There are a set number of rules for when a comma is needed. If there's no rule, you don't need a comma.

Joining Independent Clauses with FANBOYS

- Use a comma with a coordinating conjunction to join two or more independent clauses.
- An **independent clause** is a clause that could stand as a complete sentence on its own. This means it contains both a subject and a verb and that it expresses a complete thought.
- **FANBOYS** is an acronym used to refer to coordinating conjunctions, which are small words used to join words and phrases. In English, the coordinating conjunctions are "for," "and," "nor," "but," "or," "yet," and "so."

Examples:

- The bell tower is supposed to ring every hour, but it is usually two minutes late.
- It's almost finals week, and I'm a double major, so I had to stay up all night studying.

Additional Notes:

- Do NOT use only a comma to combine two independent clauses without a FANBOYS.
 - Ex: The bell tower is supposed to ring every hour, it is usually two minutes late.
- Do NOT use only a FANBOYS to combine two independent clauses without a comma.

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: Because both the first and the second parts of the sentence could stand as complete sentences on their own, a comma alone isn't enough to combine them. This kind of sentence creates an error known as a comma splice. For more information, see our handout on comma splices.



- Ex: It's almost finals week so I had to stay up studying all night.
- Do NOT use a comma and FANBOYS to combine two clauses that could not be complete sentences.
 - Ex: I was working in the HCC, and took a break to grab coffee from Katora.

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: Because both parts of this sentence could stand alone as complete sentences ("It's almost finals week." and "I had to stay up studying all night."), a FANBOYS alone isn't enough to combine them. Instead, a comma would be needed before "so."

Speaking and Writing Center [3]: Because the second part of the sentence could not stand alone as a complete sentence ("Took a break to grab coffee from Katora."), no comma is needed before the FANBOYS.

Speaking and Writing Center [4]: Introductory clauses and phrases usually provide additional information that answer the questions where, when, why, and sometimes how.

Speaking and Writing Center [5]: Notice that you only need a comma when the dependent clause (the part that can't stand on its own) comes before the independent clause (the part that could be a complete sentence). So if your sentence said "My professor canceled class today because the air conditioning in Combs was broken," you wouldn't need a comma. "My professor canceled class today" could be a complete sentence, so it is an independent clause, but "because the air conditioning in Combs was broken" could not be a complete sentence, so it is a dependent clause.

Speaking and Writing Center [6]: For example, in the sentence "Professor Lehman, who teaches discrete math, is an easy grader," the phrase "who teaches discrete math" is nonessential information because the sentence would still make sense if it was removed. However, in the sentence, "The professor who teaches discrete math is an easy grader," the phrase is now essential information, because it serves to identify which professor the sentence is about.

Speaking and Writing Center [7]: This is also referred to as an appositive-- information which restates the main noun in another way. In this case, this information describing the dean serves to restate and provide additional information about the subject of the sentence (Dean Jones).

Speaking and Writing Center [8]: Notice that there are punctuation marks (in this case, commas) on both sides of the phrase.

Speaking and Writing Center [9]: A non-restrictive phrase provides non-essential information, so these rules are similar to the rules for setting off nonessential information. The trick is to determine whether the information in your sentence is necessary for understanding your primary meaning or if it is providing additional (potentially very interesting information) that is not necessary to the primary meaning.

Speaking and Writing Center [10]: Traditionally, "that" is always used for restrictive phrases and "which" is always used for nonrestrictive phrases, meaning you would always use a comma before "which" and never use a comma before "that." This has become much more flexible in recent years, but some professors may still enforce this distinction.

Introductory Clauses & Phrases

- Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase.
- An introductory clause or phrase is a group of words at the beginning of a sentence that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.

Examples:

- Because the air conditioning in Combs was broken, my professor canceled class today.
- After dinner, I left the CRUC and headed back to my dorm.

Setting Off Nonessential Information

- Use commas to set off nonessential information when it appears in the middle of the sentence. Commas (or some other form of punctuation) should be placed on either side of the nonessential information.
- Nonessential information is information that could be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.

Examples:

- Dean Jones, the dean of students and associate vice president of student affairs, always brings her enthusiasm to campus events.
- Farmer Hall, which used to be called Trinkle, is home to the Computer Science Department.

Relative Clauses

- Use a comma before a relative clause when it introduces a nonrestrictive phrase. Do not use a comma when it introduces a restrictive phrase.
- A relative clause is a clause that begins with a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, that, and which).



- A restrictive phrase provides essential information needed to understand the meaning of the sentence. A nonrestrictive phrase provides additional information that is not needed to understand the meaning of the sentence.

Examples:

- Have you met Dean Rucker, who dresses up as Winnie the Pooh on Halloween and hands out candy?
- Have you met the guy who dresses up as Winnie the Pooh on Halloween and hands out candy?
- Campus walk, which runs from one end of campus to the other, is always busy between classes.
- I need to swing by the library to return the books that I borrowed.
- Tomorrow is Devil Goat Day, which is one of the most time-honored campus traditions.

Speaking and Writing Center [11]: In this example, the clause that begins with "who" is a nonrestrictive phrase. You would be able to remove the phrase, and still have a question that makes sense: "Have you met Dean Rucker?"

Speaking and Writing Center [12]: In this example, the clause that begins with "who" is a restrictive phrase because it provides essential information necessary to identify "the guy." If you were to remove the phrase, the question "Have you met the guy?" would not make any sense, because you would have no way of knowing which "guy" the speaker was talking about.

Speaking and Writing Center [13]: This clause provides extra information about campus walk, but it is not necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence, and it could be easily taken out, so it is a nonrestrictive clause. "Campus walk is always busy between classes" is still a complete sentence. Also, note that a comma is needed not just at the beginning of the clause, but also at the end of the clause.

Speaking and Writing Center [14]: In this example, "that I borrowed" is a restrictive phrase because it identifies which books will be returned.

Speaking and Writing Center [15]: Notice that there is still punctuation on both sides of the nonrestrictive phrase; however, in this case since this is the end of the sentence, the punctuation is a period instead of a comma.

Items in a List or Series

- Use commas to separate items in a list or series.

Examples:

- My favorite places on campus are the bell tower, Jepson, and the amphitheater.
- On campus walk, you're likely to see overly aggressive squirrels, tour groups following red-shirted guides, and clubs tabling for various events.

Additional Notes:

- The final comma before the "and" is called the Oxford comma, and some style guides consider it optional. However, there are times when it is needed to provide clarity.

Speaking and Writing Center [16]: If you wrote "I would like to thank my parents, Dean Jones and President Paino for supporting me during my time at Mary Washington," you might be implying that Dean Jones and President Paino are your parents. Instead, it would probably be better to write "I would like to thank my parents, Dean Jones, and President Paino for supporting me during my time at Mary Washington."

Direct Address

- Use a comma to set off a person's name when they are being directly addressed.

Examples:

- Dr. Scanlon, when are your office hours this semester?
- Are you going to be at Commencement this year, President Paino?

Speaking and Writing Center [17]: "Let's eat, Sammy" and "Let's eat Sammy" mean two very different things. With the comma, we are inviting Sammy to have dinner with us. Without the comma, we are suggesting that Sammy be dinner.



Multiple Adjectives

- Use a comma when listing multiple adjectives in a row.

Examples:

- One of the best ways to relieve stress on campus is to sit in the red, 3-D printed chairs in the HCC.
- The University of Mary Washington is a public, four-year university.

Speaking and Writing Center [18]: Lists of adjectives are treated differently than lists of nouns (seen above in items in a series); generally, when we only have two nouns in a list, we combine them with a conjunction so there is no need for a comma (i.e. chairs and tables). However, we almost always omit the conjunction in lists of adjectives favoring commas between them instead no matter how many adjectives there are (I went to the beach to fly my new, blue, diamond-shaped kite.).

Dates

- When writing out a date, use a comma after the day whether that day is a written out day of the week or a numeral.

Examples:

- The Multicultural Fair will be Saturday, April 1.
- On July 1, 2004, the Virginia General Assembly named the school the University of Mary Washington.

Speaking and Writing Center [19]: Notice, there is a comma after the written day of the week. If there were a year after April 1, there would be another comma.

Speaking and Writing Center [20]: Notice the comma comes after the "1" because that number indicates a day of the week.

Geography

- If a place name has two or more parts, use a comma to separate each part.

Examples:

- Mary Washington is in Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- Mary Washington is in Fredericksburg, Virginia, USA.

Speaking and Writing Center [21]: Notice there is a comma separating each part when there are more than two.

Addresses

- When writing out an address, use a comma after the street name and after the city. Do not use a comma between the state and the zip code.

Example:

- The mailing address for Mary Washington is 1301 College Ave.,
Fredericksburg, VA 22401.

Speaking and Writing Center [22]: Zip codes are the exception to the geography rule above.

Speaking and Writing Center [23]: If you are separating the address into different lines, you no longer need the comma. Notice in this example, there is no longer a comma between Ave. and Fredericksburg because they are on different lines. However, there is still a comma between Fredericksburg and VA because they are still on the same line. 1301 College Ave. Fredericksburg, VA 22401