

Writing Centre

COMMA USAGE

Comma usage is in some respects a question of personal writing style: some writers use commas liberally, while others prefer to use them sparingly. For instance, the use of a comma before the "and" in a series is usually optional, and many writers choose to eliminate it, provided there is no danger of misreading.

Example:

We bought scarves, mittens and sweaters before leaving for Iceland. (**Comma unnecessary before "and"**)

We ate apples, plums, and strawberry and kiwi compote. (**comma needed before "and" for clarity**)

Using a comma:

1. Use a comma before a conjunction that joins 2 [independent clauses](#) (for/and/nor/but/or/yet/so)

Example:

I just wrote a letter to my grandmother, but I forgot to mail it.

2. Use commas to separate 3 or more items in a list. These could be **words, phrases,** or **independent clauses.**

Examples:

- a. Please collect the reports, files, proposals, and transcripts for Mr. Smith. (**words**)
- b. Students must attend all classes, take accurate notes, be organized, and study hard, if they want to succeed. (**phrases**)
- c. I will make lunch, Phil will set the table, and Sue will do the dishes. (**3 independent clauses**)

- Put a comma after an introductory word, prepositional phrase, or dependant clause when it comes before an independent clause.

Examples:

- Jill, you aren't concentrating. (word)
 - In the late afternoon, they drank tea on the patio. (prepositional introductory phrase)
 - If you think this is good, you should see the first one. (dependent clause placed before an independent)
- Use 2 commas to set off non-essential information or information that interrupts the flow of a sentence. Be careful, however, that you don't change the meaning of the sentence.

Compare these meanings:

- The girls who wore red dresses ate cake. (**Essential Information – Only the girls in red dresses ate cake**)
 - The girls, who wore red dresses, ate cake. (**Non-essential Information – All the girls wore red dresses, and they all ate cake.**)
- Use a comma between coordinate (independent) adjectives.

Example:

We always hire energetic, courteous staff.

- Use commas to separate parts of a **date, parts of geographical locations, and parts of an address.**

Dates: Monday, February 3, 2007.

Geographical Locations: Paris, France.

Addresses: Send this to Bill Smith, 15 Wood Street, Toronto, Ontario.