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)

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

**Examples:**

a. Jill, you aren’t concentrating. (word)

b. In the late afternoon, they drank tea on the patio. (prepositional introductory phrase)

c. If you think this is good, you should see the first one. (dependent clause placed before an independent)

4. 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:**

a. The girls who wore red dresses ate cake. (Essential Information – Only the girls in red dresses ate cake)

b. The girls, who wore red dresses, ate cake. (Non-essential Information – All the girls wore red dresses, and they all ate cake.)

5. Use a comma between coordinate (independent) adjectives.

**Example:**

We always hire energetic, courteous staff.

6. 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.