

## Do you suffer from Comma Confusion?

Research has shown that five of the most common errors in college writing involve commas. Don't worry, we're here to help. This sheet will address the general rules to follow when using commas, as compiled by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors in their book, The Everyday Writer.

1. Use commas to set off introductory words, phrases, and clauses.
  - Slowly, she became conscious of her predicament.
  - In Fitzgerald's novel, the color green takes on great symbolic qualities.
  - To win the contest, Connor needed luck.

*Hint:* Look for the subject of the sentence ("she", the color green, Connor).

2. Use commas to set off parenthetical and transitional expressions.
  - Some studies, incidentally, have shown that chocolate, of all things, helps to prevent tooth decay.
  - Ozone is a byproduct of dry cleaning, for example.

Parenthetical expressions add information that disrupts the flow of the sentence. Transitional expressions (like *however* and *furthermore*) connect parts of a sentence.

3. Use commas to separate clauses in compound sentences.
  - The climbers will reach the summit today, or they must turn back.
  - The show started at last, and the crowd grew quiet.

When a comma sets apart two independent clauses (The show started at last – the crowd grew quiet), it usually precedes a coordinating conjunction, such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, or *yet*.

*Hint:* In sentences that include several long or complex clauses, it is usually a good idea to use a semicolon instead of a comma.

-There is no royal path to good writing; and such paths as exist do not lead through neat critical gardens, various as they are, but through the jungles of self, the world, and of craft. –Jessamyn West

### 4a. Learn to identify nonrestrictive and restrictive elements.

Nonrestrictive elements are clauses, phrases, and words that are not absolutely essential to the meaning of a sentence. They do not limit the meanings of the words they modify. In the sentences below the nonrestrictive elements have been italicized.

- The two drivers involved in the accident, *who have been convicted of drunken driving*, should lose their licenses.
- The park soon became a popular gathering place, *although some nearby residents complained about the noise*.
- The bus drivers, *rejecting the management offer*, remained on strike.
- Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, includes the famous "Prisoner's Chorus."

Restrictive elements are essential to the sentence, because they affect the meaning of the sentence. Examples:

- Drivers who have been convicted of drunken driving should lose their licenses.
- The claim that Hollins is a finishing school is a myth.

*Hint:* When determining whether an element is restrictive or nonrestrictive, mentally delete it- Does the sentence no longer make sense? Does the meaning change? Is it suddenly unclear? If you answer 'yes'

to any of these, then you probably have a restrictive clause on your hands. Once you have differentiated the restrictive from the restrictive, you can follow the rule of thumb that states:

#### 4b. Always set nonrestrictive elements apart with commas.

Look at the examples above. Each of the nonrestrictive elements has been set off by commas. Remembering to do this can save you a lot of comma-related turmoil!

#### 5. Use commas to separate three or more items in a series.

-The long, twisting, muddy road led to a shack in the woods.

-Diners had a choice of broccoli, green beans, peas, and carrots.

*Hint:* It's usually a good idea to put a comma before the "and" in a list (see example above, the comma after 'peas'). Although you may see lists that do not put a comma after the next-to-the last item, in academic writing it is sometimes preferred.

#### 6. Use commas to set off most quotations.

-A German proverb warns, "Go to law for a sheep, and lose your cow."

-"All I know about grammar," said Joan Didion, "is its infinite power."

Using commas is one way to set off a quotation. Commas should *not* be used after a question mark or exclamation point, or after you have introduced a quotation with *that* (The writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that "all is vanity.")

#### 7. Use commas to prevent confusion.

-The members of the dance troupe strutted in, in matching costumes.

-Before, I had planned to major in biology.

#### 8. Now, when NOT to use commas.

Remember number four, about restrictive and nonrestrictive elements. Just as you should set off the nonrestrictive (or inessential) elements with commas, you should remember that restrictive elements should not be set off, because without them, the sentence falls apart.

Also, remember not to place commas between the following:

A. A subject and its verb

WRONG: Watching movies late at night, has become an important way for me to relax.

B. A verb and its object or complement

WRONG: Parents must decide, how much TV their children may watch.

C. A preposition and its object

WRONG: The winner of, the trophy for outstanding community service stepped forward.

Do not use commas before coordinating conjunctions that join two parts.

WRONG: A buildup of the U.S. military, and deregulation of major industries were the Reagan administration's goals.

WRONG: Mark Twain trained as a painter, and worked as a steamboat pilot.

All examples, tips and language borrowed from the 1997 edition of *The Everyday Writer* by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors.