

The Comma: Stop and Take a Breath!

If the period is a dot that tells us to stop, the comma is the dot-with-a-tail that tells us to slow down. Commas play an important role in helping people know how to interpret what they read. A missing or misplaced comma can drastically alter the meaning of a sentence. Consider how the meaning of the following book dedication changes (ludicrously!) when the second comma is omitted:

“This book is dedicated to my parents, the Pope, and Mother Theresa.”

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--KPBS, “A Way with Words,” 20 June 2007.

So, what’s so important about this dot-with-a-tail thing? Commas allow readers to separate ideas. Without commas, a sentence can become too long or confusing.

Just remember...

Here is a simple way to remember where to place commas—**before**, **after**, **within**, and **around**:

1. Use a comma **before** a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS: for, and, not, but, or, yet, and so) that joins two independent clauses in a compound sentence.
 - a. Brendan stayed out late last night, so he barely made it to class on time.
 - b. I need to find a ride home, for my car broke down yesterday.
2. Use a comma **after** an introductory word, phrase, or clause that comes before the subject of your sentence.
 - a. Before she wrote the essay, Mimi spent three hours researching.
 - b. Since the movie was sold out, we rented a film from Reel Divine.
3. Use commas **within** a list or series.
 - a. At Holy Grounds, you can buy coffee, hang out with friends, or meet up with your study group.
 - b. I had a hard time choosing between flavors like Strawberry Fields, Peanut Butter Twist, and Coconut Chocolate Almond.
4. Use commas **around** nonrestrictive elements that provide extra information.
 - a. Tutors at the Writing Center, who are all very nice, will help you write stronger papers.
 - b. My best friend, whom I met at college, knows all of my secrets.

Also keep in mind...

Other places to use commas:

1. To set off contrasting elements, interjections, direct address, and tag questions
 - a. It’s my roommate’s turn, not mine, to clean the bathroom.
 - b. Good grief, it’s snowing!
 - c. Excuse me, sir, do you have the time?
 - d. Our professor didn’t extend the final paper deadline, did she?

2. To set off parts of dates and addresses
 - a. Thanksgiving this year fell on Thursday, November 22, 2007.
 - b. I am a student at Villanova University, and live just west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in Wynnefield.

3. To set off quotations
 - a. "I'm not sure where to use commas," said a student to her writing center tutor.
 - b. "Just remember," advised the tutor, "*before, after, within, and around.*"

Don't go comma-crazy!

Unnecessary commas can ruin a perfectly good sentence:

1. Do not use a comma after a question mark or exclamation point.
 - a. "Out, damned spot!," cries Lady Macbeth.

2. Do not use a comma to introduce a quotation with *that* or when you do not quote a speaker's exact words.
 - a. My high school English teacher warned us that, "the fruits of procrastination are often bitter."
 - b. She remarked, that it was very warm for December.

3. Do not use commas around restrictive elements that limit, or define, the meaning of the words they modify.
 - a. I can't watch films, with lots of blood and violence.
 - b. The pop star, Britney Spears, has sold more than 83 million records worldwide.

4. Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.
 - a. My Christmas list includes, some DVDs, the new Goo Goo Dolls disc, and a pair of pink Ugg boots.
 - b. I hope that this has been a fun, exciting, helpful, workshop on how to use commas.

When in doubt...

If you're not sure where to put a comma, read your sentence out loud. Where do you naturally pause to take a breath or transition to another idea? That's probably where your dot-with-a-tail wants to land!

Fix this!

Before the semester ends I need to finish my three research papers submit a conference proposal, and return the books I checked out from Falvey Library. My flight home departs Wednesday December 19 from the Philadelphia International Airport. I change planes in Chicago Illinois, and arrive in San Diego, California late at night. "I can't wait to see my family!," I told my best friend the other day. My parents, two sisters and grandparents, will all be together for the holiday. My sister, the middle one might get engaged over Christmas so I am both excited and apprehensive. "Don't worry" she reassured me "you'll really like him." On Christmas day I enjoy setting the table with special china and silverware. Our family favorites include homemade yeast rolls, cranberry relish and creamed onions. As a child the best part of Christmas was opening gifts; as an adult it's spending time with family.