

Comma Rules

Rule One

Put a comma before coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*--remember the acronym FANBOYS) **only** if they connect two independent clauses (a clause that is capable of standing alone as a sentence).

independent clause + conjunction + independent clause = comma before conjunction

- Jerry picked vegetables, **and** Bob mowed the lawn.
- I did not bring an umbrella in the rain, **nor** did I wear a raincoat.

Rule Two

Do **not** put a comma before coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) if they connect an independent clause with a dependent clause (a group of words that cannot stand alone as a sentence).

*independent clause + conjunction + dependent clause = **no** comma before conjunction*

- The teacher scolded the boy for being late **and** sent him to the office.
- We watched the sky **and** hoped to see a shooting star.

Rule Three

Put a comma after words, phrases, and clauses in a series.

- **Dogs, cats, and birds** are common household pets. (words)
- The hound ran **down the hill, through the meadow, and into the forest** in pursuit of the rabbit. (prepositional phrases)
- **When the weather warms up, when the snow is melted, and when the roads are clear,** school will be back in session. (three dependent clauses followed by an independent clause)

Rule Four

Put a comma between coordinate adjectives. (They are coordinate if they sound natural when they are either reversed or joined by *and*.)

- The road dwindled into a **rough, narrow** path.
- or
- The road dwindled into a **narrow and rough** path.

The comma does not separate adjectives when they sound unnatural when switched or separated by *and*.

- Correct: She gave the teacher a **large red** apple.
- Incorrect: She gave the teacher a **red and large** apple.

Rule Five

Set off long introductory dependent clauses and phrases (four or more words) with a comma. These clauses and phrases do not include the subject and verb of the sentence, and they cannot stand alone as complete sentences.

- **At the beginning of spring**, flowers began to bloom.
- **Although the prices were reduced**, they were still absurdly high.
- **Having finished his homework**, the boy was permitted to go outside and play.
- **Forgetting to set her alarm clock**, Ann woke up to find she was three hours late for work.
- **A studious and hard-working student**, Thomas turned in every assignment on time.

Commas are optional after introductory word groups that are not four words or more.

- **During summer** we go on vacation.
- **On Fridays** we order pizza.

Rule Six

If the dependent clause comes after the independent clause, no comma is needed.

- We went to the store to buy school supplies **since the new school year was about to begin**.
- English is my favorite subject **because I love to read and write**.
- The boy felt nervous **even though he had been to the dentist before**.

Rule Seven

Use commas around nonessential words, phrases, and clauses that interrupt the flow of the sentence. If these words are dropped, the sentence will still make sense and retain its basic meaning.

- John, **the boy who drives the ice cream truck**, is my brother.
- John is my brother. (the sentence retains the basic meaning without “the boy who drives the ice cream truck”)
- The pillow, **soft and fluffy**, cushioned my head as I napped on the hammock.
- The pillow cushioned my head as I napped on the hammock. (sentence still makes sense, retains basic meaning)

Do not use the commas if the clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence and cannot be taken out.

- Everyone **who does their homework and studies** will make an “A.”
- Everyone will make an “A.” (meaning is not the same, it is not guaranteed that **everyone** will make an “A”)
- All the apples **which were brown and rotted** were thrown away.
- All the apples were thrown away. (meaning is not the same, not **all** of the apples will be thrown away)

Rule Eight

Use commas to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.

- The instructor warned, “Students who do not study hard will fail the test.”
- Mother asked, “Who wants to go get ice cream?”
- “Yes,” the store clerk replied, “we do have this shirt in your size.”

Rule Nine

Use a comma to separate sentence elements to create the intended meaning.

- Still water is very refreshing.
- Still, water is very refreshing. (the comma changes the meaning)
- When we visited John, Robert came along.
- When we visited, John Robert came along.

Rule Ten

Use a comma to set off most conjunctive adverbs (*however, otherwise, therefore, similarly, hence, on the other hand, and consequently*). But do not use a comma after the conjunctive adverbs *then, thus, soon, now, and also*. In the following examples, a semicolon is used to separate two independent clauses.

- The sick woman needs to be given treatment; **otherwise**, her illness will become fatal.
- Mark’s goals were materialistic; **therefore**, he discarded any career choices that offered only minimal salaries.
- The maid washed the dishes and mopped the floor; **however**, she forgot to make the beds.
- We need to evacuate the beach quickly; **soon** there will be a severe thunderstorm.