

A Quick Guide To Commas (,)

Before studying this guide, we recommend reading [A Quick Guide to Full Stops](#).

Please note: This guide contains various exemplars. Where a particular exemplar is incorrectly written, it has a cross next to it (X). Where a particular exemplar is correctly written, it is followed by a tick (✓)

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1: Commas Aid Clarity

When used effectively, commas bring clarity to sentences. They can help our readers to navigate our writing more easily, to distinguish important information from incidental detail, and to detect the intended rhythm and flow of our writing style.

Below is a list of definitions or explanations that you may see in various style guides and glossaries of punctuation. All of them are valid, though you may find some more useful than others:

- A comma gives a ‘soft pause’
- A comma tells the reader where to take a breath
- A comma can help enhance ‘the flow’ of a piece of text
- A comma helps to make meaning clear by separating words or phrases in a sentence
- Commas split up different parts of a sentence
- Commas partition off non-essential information

Sometimes (though not in all cases), commas can be seen as discretionary – in other words they may be used or not used, depending on the effect we want to create in our writing. However, there are some cases where the use of commas is highly recommended, or even essential.

Before we begin to explore the various uses commas have, it is important to make clear that they are fundamentally different from full stops. Despite this, they are often incorrectly used instead of full stops. The next section will explore this issue further.

2. The Difference Between a Full Stop and a Comma

A full stop is used to separate one sentence from another:

- It is raining. I will get wet.

However, a comma cannot be used in this way. All the incorrect sentences below are examples of comma-splicing, which involves using a comma where a full stop is required:

- Today is Monday, tomorrow is Tuesday. X (incorrect)
- Today is Monday. Tomorrow is Tuesday ✓ (correct)

- A: The procedure is flawed, it is difficult to follow. X
- B: The procedure is flawed. It is difficult to follow. ✓

- Risk-taking is a part of life, it should be managed properly. X
- Risk-taking is a part of life. It should be managed properly. ✓

- A: Her condition improved, this was not expected. X
- B: Her condition improved. This was not expected. ✓

PAUSE

If you are unsure why the first exemplar in each pair is incorrect, please read [A Quick Guide to Full Stops](#) before proceeding further.

3: Rhythm and Flow: Hearing the Pauses

One way of grasping what commas do is to read a portion of text aloud, paying attention to how the commas lend a sense of rhythm and flow to the writing. Consider the following passage:

- More people should travel by bus, train and tram. This would improve traffic flows in the city. In places where toll roads have been introduced, public transport is popular. Polls indicate that most people want the traffic flow to be improved, and this shows that people would be willing to support the introduction of tolls. Therefore, the council should introduce heavy tolls.

Read the text aloud and listen to how you phrase the sentences. Notice how, in the second sentence, there is no need to pause and the rhythm suggests itself without the need for commas:

- This would improve traffic flows in the city.

However, when we get to the third sentence, the comma invites us to pause momentarily after the word 'introduced' before continuing onto the end of the sentence:

- In places where toll roads have been introduced, public transport is popular.

The same is true for the last sentence, where we are encouraged to pause after the word 'Therefore' before continuing:

- Therefore, the council should introduce heavy tolls.

4: The Joining Comma

Although hearing the natural rhythm and flow of sentences can help us decide where to place a comma, there are also some rules to guide us.

We saw in Section 1 that a comma cannot be used to join one sentence with another sentence:

- Today is Monday, tomorrow is Tuesday. X (incorrect)

However, it is possible to join complete sentences with a conjunction or a joining word such as 'and', 'but', 'yet', 'or' and 'for'. When we do this, it is standard practice to use a comma immediately before the conjunction:

- Today is Monday, and tomorrow is Tuesday. ✓ (correct)

PAUSE:

It is important to realise that it is the conjunction that joins the two sentences, not the comma. The comma is simply used to indicate the 'pause' that we read about in Section 2:

- The students were listening, for the lecture was interesting.
- The students were listening, and they were taking notes.
- The statistic are flawed, but they are useful.
- Researchers may agree, or they may arrive at differing conclusions.
- Commuters favour trains, yet often find the trains are running late.

PAUSE

A common mistake is to use these conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, rather than as linking words to join sentences together.

5: Words That Should Not Be Used Mid-Sentence

There are other linking words called conjunctive adverbs. These should not be used mid-sentence like the conjunctions we saw in Section 3. Instead, they should be used at the beginning of a sentence, with the comma placed immediately after them. A common example is 'However':

- The results were published, however they were flawed. X
- The results were published. However, they were flawed. ✓

Other conjunctive adverbs that can be used in this way include 'Furthermore', 'Therefore', 'Moreover' and 'Nevertheless':

- The results were surprising. Furthermore, they were unwelcome.
- The results were unsatisfactory. Therefore, they must be reviewed.
- The results were unsatisfactory. Moreover, they were controversial.
- The results were satisfactory. Nevertheless, there was room for improvement.

PAUSE:

Please refer to the passage about traffic flow on page 3, where 'Therefore' is used in this way.

For information on how to use conjunctive adverbs with semicolons, please see Section 4 of:-

[A Quick Guide to Semicolons](#)

6: Commas Between Main and Supplementary Sentence Parts

In Section 3, we saw how a pause is created when we use a conjunction preceded by a comma to link two sentences together:

Today is Monday, and tomorrow is Tuesday.

A similar pause occurs when we use a comma after a supplementary phrase attached to the beginning of a sentence. The supplementary phrase is not grammatically complete on its own, and does not express a complete thought or idea:

- In places where toll roads have been introduced. X

In this example above, our meaning is unclear. What happens in places where toll roads have been introduced? We need to continue and get to the main part of our sentence, and use a comma directly before the main part:

- In places where toll roads have been introduced, public transport is popular. ✓

Here are some further examples. In each case, the main part of the sentence is underlined.

- Where public transport is unreliable, commuters walk to work.
- Because her car is being serviced, she takes the train.
- As a result of the experiment, a paradigm shift occurred.

Supplementary phrases beginning with the word 'Although' are very common. Again, use a comma to separate these phrases from the main part of the sentence:

- Although a care plan was put in place, there were problems with its implementation.

It is also common to use supplementary phrases when we are stating that something will only happen under certain conditions. Once again, use a comma to separate these conditional phrases from the main part of the sentence:

- If the report proves conclusive, changes to the protocol will occur.
- In the event of an accident, please dial 999.
- Unless adequate provision is made, this child may struggle to make progress.

Finally, phrases starting with the words 'When' and 'While' also require a pause and a comma:

- When resources run low, provision becomes problematic.
- When the test subjects were examined, they were found to be healthy.
- While the plans are under consideration, the company will continue operating as normal.
- While examining the data, I discovered an error.

PAUSE:

For guidance on the underlying grammar of supplementary phrases attached to sentences, please consult Sections 4 and 11 of:-

[A Guide to Writing Sentences](#)

7. Using a Comma Before ‘Which’

In Section 5, we saw that supplementary phrases can be added to the beginning of sentences, requiring the use of a comma.

Sometimes, a sentence may have a supplementary phrase tagged onto the end of it. Phrases starting with the word ‘Which’ often function in this way:

- Minneapolis has a population of about 400,000, which makes it the largest city in Minnesota.

In the above example, the phrase beginning ‘which’ provides additional information that is not required to understand the main part of the sentence. Because the information is supplementary, it makes sense to pause before providing it. Once again, the comma marks the pause:

- I had to abandon the experiment, which put my research schedule back by two months.
- The sentence passed was ten years, which seemed unduly lenient.
- I trained as a Cognitive Behavioral Therapist, which gave me a keen insight into human behaviour.

PAUSE

A common mistake is to try and continue the sentence with a comma followed by the word ‘this’, instead of the word ‘which’:

I trained as a Cognitive Behavioral Therapist, this gave me a keen insight into human behaviour. X

This is an example of comma splicing, as described in Section 1.

8: Commas to Separate Items in Lists

i. Listing Single Items

When providing a list of items as part of our regular sentence structure, it is standard practice to insert a comma after each individual item in that list:

- Forms of transport include car, train, bus, tram, bike, boat... (etc) ✓

However, there is generally no need to use a comma to separate the penultimate item in our list from the final item. Instead, use the conjunctions 'and' or 'or':

- More people should travel by bus, train and tram. ✓
- More people should travel by bus, train or tram. ✓

ii. Listing Short Phrases

Sometimes, our list will consist not of single words but short phrases. Most of the time, the same rule applies:

- People mentioned taking bus rides, travelling to work by train and enjoying tourist trips by tram. ✓

Sometimes, to aid clarity, it is helpful to include a comma before the conjunction used to separate the penultimate item from the final item:

- More people should travel by taxi, train, and horse and cart. ✓

In the example above, if we did not include the second comma, it might appear that we are to take 'train and horse' together as one item, whereas it is 'horse and cart' that is to be read together as one item.

iii. Listing Complete Sentences

Sometimes, our list may even consist of complete sentences:

- I travel by bus, my brother takes the train, my mother catches the tram and my father walks everywhere. ✓

Although the above example is acceptable, we might decide to include a comma before the conjunction, in case a reader misunderstands and thinks our mother 'catches the tram and my father':

- I travel by bus, my brother takes the train, my mother catches the tram, and my father walks everywhere. ✓

This is an effective example of how the use of a comma can sometimes be at the writer's own discretion.

iv. Short List of Descriptive Words

Sometimes it is necessary to use a short list of describing words that all apply to the same thing. The same rule applies as above, with a conjunction being used between the penultimate and final word in the list:

- The report was constructive, balanced and fair.
- The findings were significant, surprising and unwelcome.
- The child is playful, high-spirited and creative.

PAUSE

Semicolons (;) are used to separate more complex items in lists: please see:-

[A Quick Guide to Semicolons](#)

9: Further Steps to Improve Your Punctuation

In addition to studying this guide, we recommend the following:

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| Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard | <p>The English Support site on Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of language development, including punctuation.</p> <p>You will find a link to Blackboard on the university's Spelling and Grammar page.</p> |
| Consult books and other resources | <p>The Students' Guide to Writing is a useful resource if you want to improve your confidence with punctuation.</p> |
| Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of punctuation. | <p>One of the best ways to master commas is to encounter and study them in their natural setting—in books, journals and online articles. Set some time aside to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers create pauses, lists and separation of phrases using commas.</p> |
| Proof-read | <p>Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure you are using commas where they are needed.</p> |