Comma Basics

The comma is probably the most used and misused punctuation mark. Many people use commas intuitively but don’t understand the rules about using them.

But there are rules, and they are easy to learn. Commas have five major usages: 1) to differentiate between items in a list or series, 2) to avoid comma splices and run-ons by separating independent clauses, 3) to sequester non-essential data in appositive phrases, 4) to denote introductory elements, and 5) to shift from normal text to dialogue or quotations.

Lists and Series
The simplest use of commas is in the formation of series or lists. If a sentence includes a list or series of clauses, each item must be separated by a comma.

Correct: The day before the launch of the manned Mars mission, astronauts were advised to eat healthy foods, spend at least an hour in meditation, and get a good night’s sleep.
Incorrect: Maj. Findlay ignored these recommendations, eating fried chicken dancing and drinking until the wee hours of the morning.

Not punctuating a list correctly can inadvertently combine items or make the sequence of events unclear. Is Findlay eating fried chicken? Is he eating fried chicken and dancing at the same time? It is hard to tell without the commas: “Major Findlay ignored these recommendations, eating fried chicken, dancing, and drinking until the wee hours of the morning.”

This is where it can get confusing, though. Both “The shuttle’s food included bread, mustard, ham, and cheese” and “The shuttle’s food included bread, mustard, ham and cheese” can be correct. See the difference? The last comma in the series—often called the Oxford comma—is optional. If you are writing according to a specific style guide, check the style guide for rules on commas in lists.

Avoiding Run-ons and Comma Splices
The comma is also helpful in avoiding run-ons and comma splices. A run-on is when a sentence has two independent clauses (complete sentences with a new subject and verb) connected without a conjunction (and, yet, but, for, so, et cetera) and a comma.

Correct: It was three hours before launch, and the pre-launch checklist was going smoothly.
Incorrect: Everything seemed normal they couldn’t find Maj. Findlay.

If you read the incorrect sentence to yourself, your internal narrator becomes out of breath. It’s also unclear if it’s normal for Maj. Findlay to be absent. Adding a comma and a conjunction corrects this error: “Everything seemed normal, but they couldn’t find Maj. Findlay.”
In a comma splice, two complete sentences are joined together by a comma and only a comma. This is only half-correct: you need both a comma and a coordinating conjunction to join two complete sentences together.

*Correct:* Suddenly, Maj. Findlay appeared in a beam of light, and one of the launch operators screamed.
*Incorrect:* He began raving about alien abductions and alien spaceships, NASA control summarily dismissed his warnings and told him to leave the premises.

All that has to be done to correct the incorrect example is to add a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) after the comma. In this case, the conjunction “but” is probably the most appropriate: “He began raving about alien abductions and alien spaceships, but NASA control summarily dismissed his warnings and told him to leave the premises.”

**Appositive Phrase**

Appositive phrases are not integral to the meaning of the sentence but give important information by identifying a subject or differentiating it from others. They require commas before and after the phrase to set them apart from the noun they modify and the rest of the sentence.

*Correct:* Just as Maj. Findlay left, a message came from the Martian commander, a multi-tentacled beast, addressing NASA and the Earth.
*Incorrect:* Gen. Henderson the highest ranking official present made a reply.

Without the commas, the information in the sentence seems garbled: it is unclear whether Henderson and the official are the same person. Two commas can fix this: “Gen. Henderson, the highest ranking official present, made a reply.”

**Introductory Elements**

**Introductory Phrases**

An introductory phrase gives context to the sentence that follows it. Because introductory phrases are often prepositional phrases, looking for prepositions (in, on, under, when, to, from, after, etc.) at the beginning of a sentence can help you spot them.

*Correct:* To everyone’s relief, the Martian commander was much nicer than he looked.
*Incorrect:* From the beginning of the incident the Air Force had been on high alert.

In the incorrect sentence, the two prepositional phrases at the beginning make up an introductory phrase that gives context to the sentence. Because it is at the beginning of the sentence, we need a comma after “incident” to signal the beginning of the main clause of the sentence to readers.
There are lots of other kinds of introductory phrases. For example, if you put an appositive phrase or an infinitive phrase at the beginning of a sentence, it becomes an introductory phrase as well:

**Appositive:** A cautious man, Gen. Henderson kept the Air Force on high alert and sent word to NATO as well as several of the USA’s close allies. **Infinitive:** To be ready for any attack, the Navy pointed all its lasers at the sky and tracked the alien ships.

**Dependent Clauses**
Dependent clauses have a subject and a verb. They would normally be complete sentences, but they begin with a kind of word or phrase called a subordinating conjunction (because, although, as far as, when, after, where, etc.)

**Example:** Although everyone was a little afraid, they were also excited to make first contact with an alien life form.

In this example, “everyone was a little afraid” could be a complete sentence: it has a subject, a verb, and an object. However, because of the word “although,” it is not a complete sentence. A dependent clause can also be placed at the end of a sentence, though, and then it does not need a comma.

**Example:** They were excited to make first contact with an alien life form although they were also a little afraid.

**Introductory Words**
Of all the introductory elements, introductory words are probably the easiest to spot. Also called transition words, they signal a change in topic or ease the switch between sentences. The classic example of an introductory word is actually used in the transitions of old cowboy movies: “Meanwhile, back at the ranch…” Transition words are words and phrases like furthermore, as a matter of fact, besides, for example, likewise, similarly, and however, just to name a few.

**Example:** As a matter of fact, they were so excited that they forgot to launch their space shuttle and missed the launch window entirely.

Use transition words sparingly and only in appropriate places. They can get very repetitive when you use them a lot; however, they can be useful if you don’t over use them.

**If/Then statements**
If/then statements are a specific kind of sentence structure with special rules—conditional sentences. If the first clause in a sentence begins with “if,” then the clause needs to have a comma following it. Notice that the previous sentence is an example of the rule it explains. Here are three different ways of using a conditional structure:

**Example:** If anybody attacked the aliens, the world would not stand a chance.
Example: If Gen. Henderson had not been there, then we might be at war with the aliens. Example: If we went to war with the aliens, there is a good chance we would not win.

Though there are a few different ways to express a conditional sentence, the if/then pairing is probably the most common.

**In dialogue or quotations**
In dialogue or quotations, commas are used to separate what is being said or quoted from the text of the essay itself. In dialogue and in text, what is said has to be introduced or followed with a verb phrase like “they said.”

*Correct:* “So I guess Findlay was telling the truth after all,” Henderson said.  
*Incorrect:* “I know.” “Giorgio Tsoukalos is going to have a field day with this.”

In the first example, it is obvious who is speaking: Gen. Henderson. In the second, which punctuates the sentences with periods and does not connect with the text, we don’t know who is speaking and we are unsure if anyone is speaking at all. It is unclear whether this is a quotation or if it has been taken from a book.

**Contact**
This is a good overview of the major uses of commas, but there are far too many rules to cover in one handout. Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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