Commas

Many students learn comma myths before they learn comma rules. Unfortunately, the myth that a comma should simply be placed wherever a natural pause in speech occurs prevents many students from learning where to properly place commas. The rules of comma usage are complex, but they are not impossible to learn with some practice.

A Short Refresher on Phrases and Clauses

Learning where to place commas largely depends on one's ability to identify phrases and clauses.

A **phrase** is a group of words that does *not* contain both a subject (noun phrase) *and* a predicate (verb phrase). It contains *either* a subject *or* a predicate, so a phrase does not function as an independent unit.

A **clause** is a group of words that contains *both* a subject *and* a predicate. A clause can be independent (a complete sentence) or dependent (an incomplete sentence). Clauses can be restrictive (necessary to the meaning of the sentence) or non-restrictive (extra information in the sentence).

General Rules for Using Commas with Phrases and Clauses

- When joining two independent clauses (complete sentences) with a conjunction, always use a comma before the conjunction.

- If a sentence begins with a dependent clause (as this one does), the dependent clause should be followed by a comma.

- If the dependent clause is non-restrictive, it should be separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma (or commas, if it appears in the middle of the sentence).

- When joining an introductory phrase (described below under "Introductory Phrases") to a sentence, it should be followed by a comma.

- When using a phrase or clause as an appositive, it should be separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma (or commas, if it appears in the middle of the sentence).

Compound Sentences

Compound sentences are formed when two independent clauses (complete sentences) are combined with a comma and conjunction. Conjunctions can also be used to join elements in a short, two-item list or compound elements in a sentence, which can be confusing.

Compound Sentence:
Mark and Josh like to write,   and   they also like to read.
   [independent clause]   [conjunction]   [independent clause]

Short List:
Mark and Josh like to write and read.

Lists

There are two schools of thought concerning the use of commas in lists that contain more than two items.

The Oxford comma (also called the "serial comma") requires each list item to be followed by a comma.

> Ex: *Tom needs to buy broccoli, ham, mustard, and green beans at the store.*

The AP comma, however, omits the comma following the item that immediately precedes the word "and."

> Ex: *Tom needs to buy broccoli, ham, mustard and green beans at the store.*

The AP comma is used most commonly in the press, but the Oxford comma is typically considered more appropriate for academic writing.

Joining Dependent and Independent Clauses

When joining a dependent clause to an independent clause, the clauses should be separated by a comma if the dependent clause comes first.

Adverb clauses are a common type of dependent clause. An adverb clause answers "How?" "Why?" "When?" or "Under what circumstance?"

> Ex: *When he graduated from high school, James decided that Harvard was the school for him.*

When an adverb clause comes after an independent clause, no comma is needed.

> Ex: *James decided that Harvard was the school for him when he graduated from high school.*

Introductory Phrases

Groups of words used at the beginning of a sentence to provide context are called introductory phrases, and they must be followed by a comma. Introductory phrases can be prepositional, past-participial, present-participial, infinitive, or absolute phrases.* Transitional words like "however," "nevertheless," "likewise," "furthermore," and so on are also considered introductory phrases.

> Ex: ***In 1997**, Harry's cat spontaneously combusted.*
> [prepositional phrase]

> Ex: ***Walking being her favorite activity**, Sally decided to go hiking during her vacation.*
> [absolute phrase]

> Ex: ***Moving as quickly as possible**, the students got to their dorm rooms and out of the cold.*
> [present participial phrase]

*See the Phrases handout for more information on phrase types.

Parenthetical Expressions

A parenthetical expression is like a side note that adds extra information to a sentence. Types of parenthetical expressions include appositives, expressions of contrast, direct addresses, and tag sentences.

<u>**Appositives and Restrictive/Non-Restrictive Modifiers**</u>

An appositive (also called an adjective clause) is anything that renames or describes a noun, and it should be placed inside commas. However, if the descriptive element (modifier) is restrictive (necessary to the meaning of the sentence), it should not be placed inside commas.

Note: Modifiers are rarely inherently restrictive or non-restrictive. It is often up to the discretion of the writer to decide, depending on the intended meaning of a given sentence.

Appositive:
>	*Mr. Anderson, **the orthodontist**, says that Kara needs braces.*

Non-restrictive modifier:
>	*Wuzzles**, who have bellybuttons,** are green.*
(This sentence is communicating that all wuzzles have bellybuttons).

Restrictive modifier:
>	*Wuzzles **who have bellybuttons** are green.*
(The sentence is communicating that only wuzzles who have bellybuttons are green, but not all wuzzles are green).

<u>**Expressions of Contrast**</u>

Expressions of contrast communicate what something is *not*, and they should be set off with commas.

>	Ex: *The house needs to be painted now, **not next week**.*

>	Ex: *Ants, **although small in stature**, are exceptionally strong.*

<u>**Direct Address**</u>

Any time a person is addressed directly, the person's name or given identifier should be set off by commas.

>	Ex: *You, **Mr. Glaston**, are guilty.*

>	Ex: ***Matthew**, go to bed.*

>	Ex: ***You**, pick up that shovel.*

<u>**Tag Sentences**</u>

A tag sentence follows an independent clause and contains both a verb and a pronoun. Tag sentences are often questions, but not always. Tag sentences should be set off with commas and ended with appropriate punctuation.

>	Ex: *The clouds look lovely today, **he thinks**.*

>	Ex: *The bus is not coming, **is it?***

Interjections

An interjection is a word or words that show emotion. An interjection should be set off with a comma, unless it is used alone, in which case it should be punctuated with an exclamation point.

>	Ex: ***Uh-oh**, Tina is going to be late.*

>	Ex: ***Oops!** The cat escaped again.*

Quoted Elements

Quotations are often introduced with groups of words that give them context. Quotation introductions should be followed by a comma.

>   Ex: **Mr. Wigglesworth said,** *"Be true to you or be blue."*

It is not necessary, however, to follow a quotation introduction with a comma when paraphrasing or using a partial quotation.

Paraphrase:
>   **Karin Lockhart believes that** *one should always sing to one's plants.*

Partial Quotation:
>   **In his book, Kory describes how he feels** *"a good monkey should always behave."*

Commas with Cities and States

A city and a state should always be separated by a comma. If a city and a state are in the middle of a sentence, a comma should follow the state as well.

>   Ex: *My family moved from* **Lunenburg, Massachusetts,** *to* **Trophy Club, Texas,** *in 1989.*

Dates

When a date is written with the month first, a comma should come between the day and the year. If the date is written with the day first, no comma is needed. If the date appears within a sentence, a comma should come after the year as well.

>   Ex: July 12, 1772

>   Ex: 2 December 1904

>   Ex: January 4, 2002, was a great day!