

THE COMMA

The comma is a pause. It gives your reader a chance to stop for a moment, to think about where your sentence has been and where it is going, and to prepare to read on.

Although this will cover some basic uses of the comma, there is one generalization you should always keep in mind: if there is no reason for a comma, leave it out.

COMMAS AFTER ITEMS IN A SERIES

1. I like apples, oranges, and pears.
 - What three things do I like? *Apples, oranges, and pears.*
 - Use commas to separate three or more items in a series.
2. We will walk through the park, take in a film, and visit a friend.
 - What three things will we do? *Walk through the park, take in a film, and visit a friend.*
3. She loves to walk through ethnic neighborhoods, sample odd foods, and learn foreign languages.
 - In sentence 3, what are the items in a series? *Walk through the neighborhoods, sample odd foods, and learn foreign languages.*

But:

If you want to join three or more items with *and* or *or*, do not use commas.

4. She plays tennis and softball and golf.

COMMAS AFTER INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

1. By the end of the season, our team will have won thirty games straight.
 - *By the end of the season* introduces the main idea.An introductory phrase is usually followed by a comma.
2. On Thursday we left for Hawaii.
 - A very short phrase of two or three words, as in sentence 2 does not need a comma.

COMMAS FOR DIRECT ADDRESS

Hector, you must leave now. You must leave now, Hector.
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Hector is the person spoken to; he is *being addressed directly*.

The name of the person addressed is set off by commas whenever it appears in the sentence.

COMMAS TO SET OFF APPOSITIVES

1. The Rialto, a new theater, is on 10th Street.
 - *A new theater* describes Rialto.
2. An old man, my grandfather, can barely walk.
 - What group of words describes grandfather? *An old man.*
3. They bought a new painting, a rather beautiful landscape.
 - What group of words describes painting? *A rather beautiful landscape.*
 - *A new theater, an old man, and a rather beautiful landscape* are called *appositives*.
 - An appositive is usually a group of words that describes a noun or pronoun. It can occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.
 - An appositive is set off by commas.

4. My friend Bill is not here.

- Note that a one-word appositive (*Bill*) is not set off by commas.

COMMAS FOR PARENTHETICAL EXPRESSIONS

By the way, I think you're beautiful. I think, by the way, that you're beautiful. I think that you're beautiful, by the way.
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- *By the way* modifies or qualifies the entire sentence or idea.
- It is called *parenthetical* because it seems to be almost a side remark, something that could be placed in parenthesis: *(by the way) I think that you're beautiful.*
- Set off a parenthetical expression with commas.

Here are some more parenthetical expressions, but not a complete list.

As a matter of fact	in fact
Believe me	it seems to me
I am sure	it would seem
I assure you	to tell the truth

COMMAS FOR DATES

I arrived on Tuesday, March 18, 1998 and found that I was in the wrong city.

- Note that commas separate the different parts of the date.
- Note that a comma follows the last item in a date.

But:

She saw him on Wednesday and spoke to him.

- A one word date (*Wednesday*) preceded by a preposition (*in, on, at, near, from,* and so forth) is not followed by a comma unless there is some other reason for it.

COMMAS FOR ADDRESSES

My teacher moved from Portland, Oregon, to Boston, Massachusetts.

- Note that commas separate different parts of an address.
- Note that a comma follows the last item in an address. (*Portland, Oregon,...*)

But:

Julio Smith *from* Queens is the new president of the Brooklyn Spanish club.

- A one word address preceded by a preposition (*in, on, at, near, from,* and so forth) is not followed by the comma unless there is *another* reason for it.

But:

Julio Smith, Queens, is the new president of the Brooklyn Spanish club

- Commas are required in a one word address if the preposition is omitted.