

Commas 101: The Basics

Commas have six main uses. Understanding these comma basics is the key to correct comma usage.

1. FANBOYS

Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so--a.k.a. fanboys) to separate two independent clauses:

Hannibal provided his army with a team of elephants, for he knew the gargantuan beasts could withstand the freezing mountain temperatures.

Claire went to the Farmer's Market for a bushel of beets, but she forgot her wallet at home.

2. Lists

Use commas to separate items in a list or series, including lists of adjectives that describe a noun:

Some types of toothed whales are dolphins, orcas, and sperm whales.

These are some of Susan's favorite activities: reading, cycling, eating, and napping.

Ernest Hemingway's sentences are terse, direct, and uncomplicated.

3. Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or dependent clause:

Finally, the prima donna emerged from the wings to take her bow.

At the end of his life, Carl Jung collaborated on a collection of essays called *Man and His Symbols*.

Despite her injured ankle, Florence won the 100-meter dash.

4. Direct Address

Put commas before and after the name of a person, place, or thing named or addressed in a sentence:

My dog, Jerry, barks wildly when he hears the ice cream truck drive past our house.

How, Nurse Raymond, do you intend to explain this broken window?

5. Parenthetical Words and Phrases

Use commas to delineate words and phrases that are unnecessary to a reader's understanding of a sentence. The words and phrases often rename or tell more about the words they modify, and can, in most cases, be used as substitutes for those words.

Carole King, a songwriter, helped pave the way for female musicians in the 1960s.

Desert Rose, a type of Franciscan dishware, is a popular seller at most antique malls.

6. Parenthetical Dependent Clauses

Use commas to offset parenthetical dependent clauses. These clauses usually give more information about the word or words they modify, and cannot replace those words because they are not complete sentences. Often, these clauses begin with pronouns, e.g. who, which, whose, etc.

Margaret, who starred in the school play, is planning to be an actress.

Pablo Picasso, whose paintings are known for their multiple perspectives, was a forerunner of the Cubist movement.

Emily dreams of travelling to Paris, which is called the City of Light, because she loves baguettes and accordion music.

Note: It is sometimes easy to tell where to place a comma if you read your writing aloud. Natural pauses often signal the need for a comma. However, this is NOT a foolproof method; you can always refer to this handout or another grammar guide, such as Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual* or the Purdue OWL.