



MERRIMACK COLLEGE

The 8 Basic Uses of Commas

Merrimack College Writing Center
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1. Use a Comma to Separate Independent Clauses

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- An independent clause is a fancy way of saying “a sentence that can stand alone”
- Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (a word placed between sentences of equal rank) when it joins two complete ideas
 - *and, but, yet, so, or, nor, for*



1. Use a Comma to Separate Independent Clauses

EXAMPLE

1. She went to the store, and then she stopped for some coffee.
2. We can either go to the movies, or we could get some ice cream.



1. Use a Comma to Separate Independent Clauses

- An independent clause is a fancy way of saying “a sentence that can stand alone”
- Use a comma after a conjunctive adverb (a word placed between sentences of equal rank) when it joins two complete ideas
 - *However, therefore, thus, furthermore, nevertheless*



1. Use a Comma to Separate Independent Clauses

EXAMPLE

1. The grocery was out of coffee; therefore, she stopped at the coffee shop.
2. We can go to the movies; however, we will get out too late to get ice cream.



2. Use a Comma After an Introductory Clause or Phrase

- A comma tells readers that the introductory clause or phrase has come to a close and that the main part of the sentence is about to begin.

2. Use a Comma After an Introductory Clause or Phrase

EXAMPLE

1. When Evan was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.
2. Near a small stream at the bottom of the canyon, park rangers discovered a gold mine

3. Use a Comma Between All Items in a Series

- Use a comma to separate each item in a series or list; a series is a group of three or more items having the same function and form in a sentence.

3. Use a Comma Between All Items in a Series

EXAMPLE

1. We bought apples, peaches, and bananas today. (*series of words*)

2. Mary promised that she would be a good girl, that she would not bite her brother, and that she would not climb onto the television. (*series of clauses*)

3. Use a Comma Between All Items in a Series

EXAMPLE

3. The instructor looked through his briefcase, through his desk, and around the office for the lost grade book. (*series of phrases*)

4. Use Commas to set off Nonrestrictive Clauses

- Use commas to enclose clauses not essential to the meaning of a sentence.

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- Use commas to enclose clauses not essential to the meaning of a sentence.
- These nonessential clauses are called nonrestrictive. Clauses which are essential are called restrictive.

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EXAMPLE

1. Steven Strom, whose show you like, will host a party next week. (*nonrestrictive*)

2. John, who spent the last three days fishing, is back on the job again. (*nonrestrictive*)

3. The gentleman who is standing by the fireplace is a well-known composer. (*restrictive*)



5. Use a Comma to Set Off Appositives

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- Appositives offer nonessential information.

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EXAMPLE

1. Alexander Pope, the Restoration poet, is famous for his monologues. (*appositive*)
2. The New York Jets, the underdogs, surprised everyone by winning the Super Bowl. (*appositive*)

6. Use a Comma to Indicate Direct Address

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- When a speaker in a sentence names the person to whom he is speaking, this addressing of his audience is called direct address.
- Direct address is indicated by the use of a comma or commas, depending upon its placement within the sentence.



6. Use a Comma to Indicate Direct Address

EXAMPLE

1. John, I think you're wrong.
2. I think you're wrong, John.



7. Use Commas to Set Off Direct Quotations

- A dialogue is a conversation between two or more people.

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- A dialogue is a conversation between two or more people.
- If the speaker in the conversation is mentioned, his name, (or the noun or pronoun used to refer to them), and the verb that refers to their speaking are followed by a comma.

7. Use Commas to Set Off Direct Quotations

EXAMPLE

1. Mary said, “I dislike concerts because the music is too loud.”

2. “I dislike concerts because the music is too loud,” she said.

3. “I dislike concerts,” proclaimed Mary, “because the music is too loud.”



8. Use Commas with Dates, Addresses, Titles, and Numbers

- Rules for dates: In dates, the year is set off from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.

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1. On December 12, 1890, orders were sent out for the arrest of Sitting Bull.

8. Use Commas with Dates, Addresses, Titles, and Numbers

- Rules for addresses: The elements of an address or place name are separated by commas. A zip code, however, is not preceded by a comma.

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- Rules for addresses: The elements of an address or place name are separated by commas. A zip code, however, is not preceded by a comma.
1. John Lennon was born in Liverpool, England, in 1940.

8. Use Commas with Dates, Addresses, Titles, and Numbers

- Rules for titles: If a title follows a name, separate the title from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.

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- Rules for titles: If a title follows a name, separate the title from the rest of the sentence with a pair of commas.
1. Sandra Belinsky, MD, has been appointed to the board.

8. Use Commas with Dates, Addresses, Titles, and Numbers

- Rules for numbers: In numbers more than four digits long, use commas to separate the numbers into groups of three, starting from the right. In numbers four digits long, a comma is optional.

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1. 3,500
2. 100,000
3. 6,000,000



References

“Commas: Eight Basic Uses” (n.d.) *Indiana University East*.
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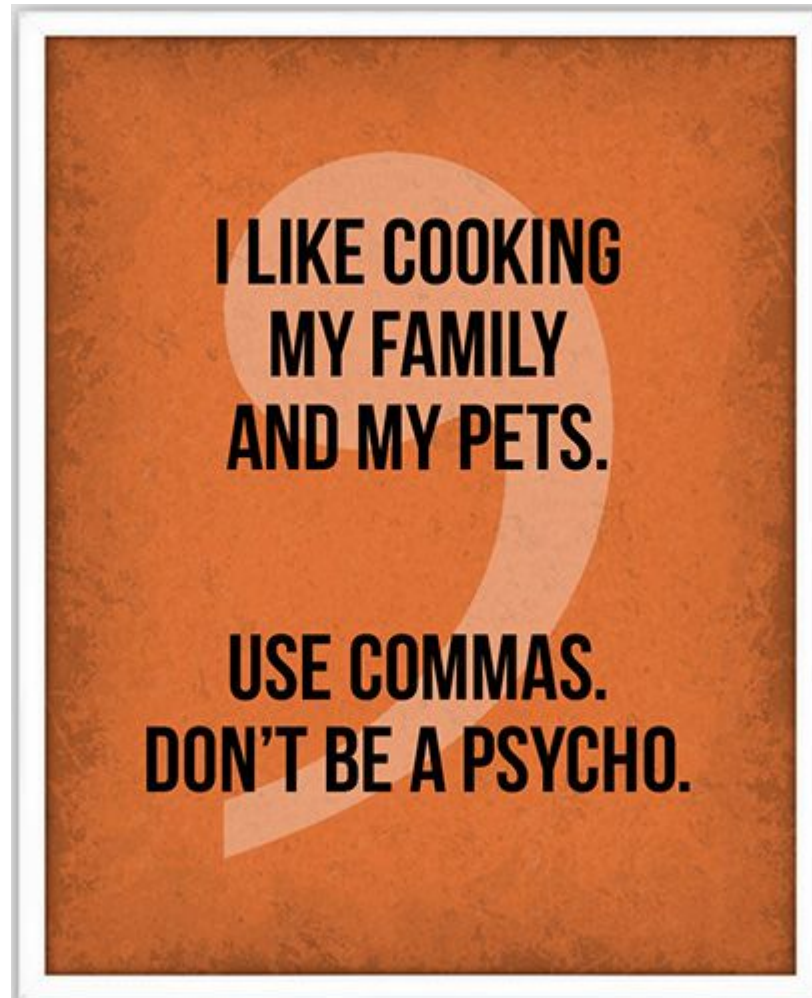
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