

Comma Rules

Comma rules can be confusing, not necessarily because they're difficult, but because no one can seem to agree on what they are. One teacher will tell you one rule for using commas while another will tell you exactly the opposite, and the frustrating truth is that they're probably both right. The rules for comma use are, for the most part, firmly set, but there are a few gray areas as well, and it's helpful to know what they are so that you understand where you absolutely need a comma, where you absolutely shouldn't put one, and where you can fiddle around a bit.

10 Key Rules

1. Use a comma to separate items in a list (nouns and adjectives). If you have more than two nouns or more than one adjective, you need to separate them with commas. In a list of nouns, you will separate the final two with the word "and" or the word "or" like this:

** Janet went to the store to buy pasta, broccoli, lemons and beans.*

You don't need a comma after "lemons," but if you put one there, it's not incorrect. It's just up to you. If you like a comma there, use one. If not, don't worry about it.

In a list of adjectives, you only need two to use a comma, and if the adjectives come before the noun, don't use "and." You only need to use "and" in a list of adjectives if the list comes after the verb "be." Look at the following two sentences:

** I have a big, old, warm quilt on my bed.*

** The quilt on my bed is big, old and warm.*

2. Use a comma to separate clauses and phrases.

** Betty walks to work every day, talks to clients, makes appointments, eats lunch, has afternoon meetings, and walks back home.*

Just like in the first rule, the final comma (after "meetings") is not necessary in a list of phrases, but as the phrases get longer, leaving out that last comma can get confusing, so it is often better to put it in just to clear things up.

** Betty gets home at 5:30, she and her husband have dinner together, they watch TV for a few hours, and they go to bed around 11:00.*

When your clauses are independent (they could stand alone as complete sentences), it is absolutely necessary to use both the comma and the "and" before the final one.

3. Use a comma to set off a non-defining subordinate clause or an appositive. A non-defining subordinate clause gives some information about a noun, but the information is not necessary for identifying that particular noun. These clauses usually begin with "which" or "who."

** The Empire State Building, which was built in 1972, is still New York's tallest building.*

The non-defining subordinate clause, "which was built in 1972," gives some information about the Empire State Building, but we don't need that information to identify

the building or distinguish it from any other Empire State Buildings. It's just extra information.

An appositive is similar, but it doesn't include "which" or "who." It's a word or phrase which can be substituted for a name.

* *Bob Vance, the president of Vance Refrigeration, married my coworker Phyllis.*

Here, you could identify Phyllis' husband as either "Bob Vance" or "the president of Vance Refrigeration." They are the same person. You will notice that short or one-word appositives such as in the phrase "my coworker Phyllis" do not have to be set off with commas. If you think a sentence or phrase would be clearer by setting off a short appositive with commas, then by all means, do it. However, it is not absolutely necessary.

4. Use a comma to set off expressions of contrast.

* *It was his money, not his looks, that first attracted me to him.*

* *He doesn't look for charm in a restaurant, but service.*

5. Use a comma to set off a quote.

* *So she said to the guy, "Look, I don't have to take this – not from you," and then she turned and walked away.*

* *"Please," he begged, "can't we just talk about this?"*

* *She stopped and turned around slowly. "It's too late," she replied. "You had your chance."*

6. Use a comma to set off a direct address.

* *The people are most grateful, Your Honor, for your years of continued service.*

* *And as for you, Ray Don, _____.*

7. Use a comma to signal that the main, independent clause is about to begin (when the sentence begins with something else) or that it is being interrupted. Words that may be used to introduce or interrupt a sentence are: in fact, on the other hand, to tell the truth, yes, no, indeed, well, nevertheless, however, in my opinion, etc.

* *The truth, in my opinion, is that we are all guilty in part. Indeed, I know that I am.*

However, I didn't pull the trigger. Mrs. Peacock, on the the other hand, did. If you have any doubts about this fact, please check her purse. You will find the gun there, I believe.

8. Use commas in addresses, dates and large numbers.

* *Portland, Oregon*

* *December 13, 2009*

* *1,945,687,238,400*

9. Use commas in the salutation and the closing expression of a letter.

* *Dear Aunt Carol,*

If you're writing a business letter that is very formal, you might substitute a colon (:) for the comma in the greeting.

* *Dear Ms. Thompson:*

The closing, however, will always use a comma.

* *Sincerely,*
Holly

10. DON'T separate a subject from its verb with a comma. Even if the subject is very long and you feel like you need a comma because anyone reading it would have to pause for a breath, don't do it.

* *The president of the largest company in North America and his most trusted and esteemed board of advisors (no comma here) wish to see you immediately.*

If you can master these ten comma rules, your writing will be neater, clearer and perfectly acceptable to English writing teachers everywhere, no matter where they stand in the gray areas.