

Commas: The least college writers should know

Advice about commas is often confusing—and sometimes wrong!

Is this you? “I was always told I use too many commas, so I try not to use many now,” or “I was always told I needed to use more commas, so I stick them in all over.”

→ **The truth:** *There is no right number of commas a sentence should have.*

Has anyone ever told you, “Put a comma wherever you pause, when you take a breath, or when you hear one”?

→ **The truth:** *This would only work if everyone spoke exactly the same—and how do you “hear” a comma?*

Or what about this? “Use commas to break up long sentences or to prevent possible confusion or misreading.”

→ **The truth:** *Okay—but where?!?*

And how many comma rules are there? 8? 4? 6? 11? If you look online, you can find sites that say all of these!

THE TRUTH: Many comma rules are confusing, which leads to advice meant to make things easier—but which often causes more problems! We think it’s easier to forget about general “rules of thumb” and, instead, to focus on the comma rules that are most important for college writers. This Writing Guide covers **the least you should know about using commas**, along with some times **not** to use a comma.

Use commas correctly to avoid COMMA SPLICES

The most common and problematic comma issue for college writers is the **comma splice**. A comma used alone between two independent clauses creates a **comma splice**:

Five other coalitions were involved, they agreed to begin by establishing common goals.

The easiest fix: use a comma **AND** a **coordinating conjunction (CC)** to separate the independent clauses. Use the CC that makes the best logical sense.

Remember the CCs with **FANBOYS**: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

Five other coalitions were involved, **and** they agreed to begin by establishing common goals.

Five other coalitions were involved, **but** they agreed to begin by establishing common goals.

Five other coalitions were involved, **so** they agreed to begin by establishing common goals.

→ **There are at least FOUR OTHER WAYS to fix a comma splice. For more support:** See the Writing Guides “Commas: Finding and fixing COMMA SPLICES” and “Sentence crimes’: Identifying and correcting fragments, comma splices, and run-ons.”

Use commas correctly to separate ELEMENTS IN A “LIST” (the serial comma):

When there are three or more “listed” elements in a sentence with (usually) the word “and” or “or” connecting the last one, **put a comma after each element**:

Local culture is reflected in how the festival uses **costuming, dancing, and folklore**.

It was either **a government, an NGO, an independent advisor, or a private company** that responded.

→ **For more support: See also the Writing Guide “The Oxford (serial) comma.” What if the “elements” in the list have commas in them? See the Writing Guide “How to use a semicolon.”**

Use commas correctly to INTEGRATE A DIRECT QUOTATION from a source

When narrative citation is used to introduce a quotation, the verb works as a “dialogue tag.”

Put a comma after/before the author/source name and dialogue tag:

As Kovlenko et al. **explain**, “**The** group’s responsibilities were at the center of its identity” (76).

Grandin Varsec, in *The Great Disquiet*, **said**, “**The** source of creativity is often uncertain, or elusive” (13).

Put a comma after the author/source name when it’s in an introductory phrase:

According to **Menger et al. (2021)**, “**Nothing** could have prepared students for the effects the pandemic had on their social lives” (p. 1185).

→ *Note that the comma stays with what is in front of it; put quotation marks, periods, etc., **after** the comma.*

NOTE: Do NOT use commas in these situations:

Indirect quotes: Do NOT use a comma if “that” is used to introduce the quotation:

Cosgrove and Jones (2024) found **that** “**All** forms of ritual were encoded” and could be analyzed using the framework.

Partial quotes: Do NOT put commas around partial quotes within sentences:

A key concern expressed by the study participants was a “**lack** of reasonable orientation” to the processes the researchers used (Marcello 74).

→ **For more support, see the Writing Guides “APA doc: Parenthetical & narrative citations” and “MLA doc: Parenthetical & narrative citations.”**

Use commas correctly to set off “INTRODUCTIONS” and “INTERRUPTORS”

Put a comma after an introductory word or phrase:

First, prepare 500 ml of a 10% NaCl solution.

In the first instance, none of the subjects exhibited meaningful behaviors.

After identifying the weak points in Robineau’s plan, Krager exerted pressure to take over the project.

→ **NOTE:** If the part in front of the comma is an independent clause—a complete sentence on its own—a comma would **NOT** be correct. See “**Use commas correctly to avoid COMMA SPLICES,**” above!

Put commas around (before and after) “interrupters”:

The most important issues, **of course**, are those that effect the voters in that area.

The committee requests, **Madame Chair**, that a vote be called to approve the entire plan as presented.

The fifth activity, **the archery event**, was more popular than the event organizers had expected.

During the Weimar Republic, **which took place over more than a decade in the early part of the 20th century**, Germany saw a rich development of art and culture.

→ **NOTE:** To test whether to use commas, cover up the interrupter and see if the sentence still makes sense: the grammar should be correct and the meaning shouldn’t change.

When NOT to use a comma: Do NOT use a comma...

...to separate a subject and verb:

- ✗ The Five Pillars of Islam, describe the foundational principles of religious practice for Muslims.
- ✓ The Five Pillars of Islam describe the foundational principles of religious practice for Muslims.

...after the verb that introduces a list:

- ✗ The three requirements are, to build the model, test it, and transport it to the site.
- ✓ The three requirements are to build the model, test it, and transport it to the site.

...between compound subject/subject phrase nor compound verbs/verb phrases:

- ✗ Both the union leadership, and the hospital staff have been notified of the changes.
- ✓ Both the union leadership and the hospital staff have been notified of the changes.

...between repeated prepositions (edit instead):

- ✗ The center shows the lengths the community went to, to create more opportunities downtown.
- ✓ The center shows the extent of what the community has done to create more opportunities downtown.