

5 Reliable Comma Rules

Many publications on punctuation and grammar describe comma placement rules based on parts of speech and phrase types, but there are five guidelines that can help you figure out where to put commas based on sentence structure:

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Between Clauses
- 3) Insertions
- 4) Lists
- 5) Tags

The Core Structure of a Sentence

The core of any sentence is a “clause.” That term just means **a subject** and *a verb that shows tense*. An “independent clause” is a clause with enough information included so that it can stand on its own without leaving the audience wondering who did what, when, and to whom or to what (if anything).

Here are some independent clauses that also are complete sentences:

Run! (The subject “you” is implied with commands.)
I ran.
I ran into a crowd.
I was able to disappear.

Introductions

Those choppy single-clause sentences quickly get boring one after another, so we usually want to combine the independent clause with other sentence parts for some variety. Let’s start with an *introduction clause or phrase* to give some background to the independent clause:

After he warned me of the danger, I ran.
Because I ran into a crowd, I was able to disappear.

- 1) **Introduction Rule:** Anything before the first independent clause is an introduction part of a sentence. Put a comma between the introduction and the first independent clause.

The introduction structure includes “If . . . , then . . .” sentences, too. When a sentence *starts* with an If-clause, it works like an introduction to the results statement or then-clause (actually saying “then” is often optional):

If you left, my heart would break.
If our dog wasn’t put in his crate at night, (then) he’d eat everything in the apartment.

Between Clauses

Now, we can keep the sentence going with another independent clause if we follow the second rule:

- 2) **Between Clauses Rule:** Between two independent clauses, put a comma and an appropriate coordinating conjunction before the subject of the second independent clause.

We combine clauses because we want to show a relationship between them. We can do that with the appropriate connecting words, such as the “FANBOYS”: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

For: consequence in clause 1, reason in clause 2

Example: I did not send you a letter, for I had nothing to say.

And: equally important clauses

Example: I sent you a letter, and you wrote me right back.

Nor: of two options, not one and not the other, either

Example: I did not write you, nor did I call.

But: contrast or difference between the clauses

Example: I meant to call you, but I never found a good time.

Or: of two options, can only choose one

Example: I could write you an email, or I could text next time.

Yet: clause 1 sets up an expectation, and clause 2 is in contrast to clause 1; however, both are still true, despite the expectation created by clause 1 that it would prevent clause 2, or that clause 2 would cancel out clause 1 in some way

Example: I neglected to put enough postage on the letter, yet somehow it still reached you!

So: reason in clause 1, consequence in clause 2

Example: People have smartphones now, so very few people send letters anymore.

Insertions

Sometimes, however, we need to insert something into a sentence, to vary the sentence structure, to include a transition element, or just to add a comment for some detail or creativity!

- 3) **Insertion Rule:** When inserting a word or words between a subject and its verb, put a comma before and after the insertion.

Examples:

Many dark green leafy vegetables, such as spinach and kale, have a lot of nutritional value.

Kale, however, remains unpopular in the US.

Lisa, my favorite co-worker of the last twenty years, just went to prison for embezzlement!
The detective, having solved the case, joined his friends at a bar for a round of pool.
The grand old house, which we had admired for years, was suddenly demolished one day.

Lists

Most people know about the list rule, but keep in mind that lists can include individual nouns working together as subjects or objects, adjectives (as long as they are interchangeable, not cumulative), and even phrases.

- 4) **List Rule:** When listing three or more items, put a comma between each separate item, and a coordinating conjunction before the last item in a list. For adjective lists, there should be no comma before the noun.

Examples:

Bubbles of air, leaves, ferns, bits of wood, and insects have been found trapped in amber.

I was served macaroni and cheese, broccoli, and eggs.

He was a no-good, low-down, dirty rotten rascal. (i.e., a no-good rotten rascal, a low-down rotten rascal, and a dirty rotten rascal = interchangeable, not cumulative, adjectives)

The preservation of existing life, the expansion of liberty without depriving others of theirs, and the pursuit of happiness without impinging on that of others are perhaps what should be inferred from one of the nation's founding documents.

Tags

This is a term that has been applied elsewhere to turn-taking questions and phrases that show who said direct speech. Here, the term is stretched a little further to include more of the sorts of conversational phrases that can get tacked onto an independent clause but which cannot stand on their own.

- 5) **Tag Rule:** Depending on placement in the sentence, the tag will often follow the introduction or insertion rules. For tag phrases after an independent clause, use only a comma, no conjunction.

- Dialogue tags (with verbs of saying)

Examples: I laughed when she muttered, "That's what he said."

"You have just entered *The Twilight Zone*," said Rod Serling.

- The name of a person being directly addressed

Examples: Of course, Lily, you may have another cup of tea.

Forgive me, Aidan, for forgetting your birthday.

- The words “yes” and “no” in a reply

Examples: Yes, the loan will probably be approved.

No, I can't imagine he would do that!

- Turn-taking questions

Examples: The film was faithful to the book, wasn't it?

Looks like it might rain, doesn't it?

- Mild interjections

Examples: Well, cases like these are difficult to decide.

Hey, that's my car!

- Afterthoughts

Examples: My backpack weighed twenty pounds, more or less.

It's about five miles beyond that hill, as the crow flies.

Tags can be combined in a sentence, and the Tag Rule applies for each use:

Examples: Yes, Lisa, you can be a bridesmaid. (Yes/No and name of person addressed tags)

Hey, get off my back, man! (Mild interjection and name for person addressed tags)

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “I'll help you move.” (Yes/No and dialogue tags)

Summary

As you have seen, regardless of the specific type of phrase added, you can determine where to put a comma by first looking for the independent clause. Then remember to mark off additions to the independent clause with commas: before the independent clause for introductions, inside it for insertions, and after it for a second independent clause or for tags and other dependent phrases.

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