



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 has 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/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 phrase or clause* to give some background to the independent clause:

After being warned 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

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

We use connecting words to combine clauses because we want to **show a relationship between them**. We can remember the various connecting words using the acronym “FANBOYS”:

For: consequence in clause 1, reason in clause 2

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

And: combines two 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: shows contrast or difference between the clauses

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

Or: of two options, a person can choose only one

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

Yet: clause 1 sets up an expectation, and clause 2 emphasizes something else is also true despite being in contrast to the expectation set up in clause 1.

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 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 also used to include conversational phrases that can be added to an independent clause but 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 spoken to

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 spoken to tags)

Hey, get off my back, man! (Mild interjection and name for person spoken to 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 information added, you can determine where to put a comma by first looking for the main independent clause.

Mark off additions to independent clauses with commas:

- BEFORE: Introduction, **independent clause**.
- INSIDE: **Subject**, insertion, **verb**.
- AFTER:
 - **Independent clause 1**, FANBOY independent clause 2.
 - **Independent clause 1**, tags or dependent phrases.