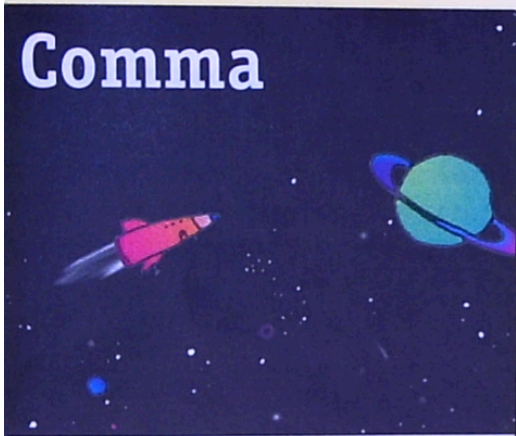


Comma



Commas are used to indicate a pause or a change in thought. Commas are used to keep words and ideas from running together, making writing easier to read. No other form of punctuation is more important to understand than the comma.

389.2

To Keep Numbers Clear

Commas are used to separate the digits in a number in order to distinguish hundreds, thousands, millions, etc.

In 1995 the total number of immigrants to the United States was 720,461. The greatest number of immigrants came from Mexico (89,932), the Philippines (50,984), and Vietnam (41,752).

Note: Commas are not used in years. Also, it is often easier to use a combination of numerals and words for certain large numbers in the millions and billions. (See 410.2 for more information.)

389.1

Between Items in a Series

Commas are used between words, phrases, or clauses in a series. (A series contains at least three items.)

Spanish, French, and German are the languages most often taught in schools today, but Chinese, English, and Hindi are the languages spoken by the most people in the world.

[words]

Being comfortable with technology, working well with others, and knowing another language and culture are important skills for today's workers. [phrases]

389.3

In Dates and Addresses

Commas are used to distinguish items in an address and items in a date.

In June our family is moving to 2727 Telluride Avenue, Denver, Colorado 81435, for a year.

In January 2029 we will celebrate the 100th birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. On August 28, 1963, he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

The address of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., is 449 Auburn Ave. N., Atlanta, GA 30312-1503.

Comma Rules

390.1

To Set Off Dialogue

Commas are used to set off the exact words of the speaker from the rest of the sentence.

The electronics executive said, "Did you know that computers can now speak with a Texas drawl?"

Note: When you are reporting or summarizing what someone said, use no comma (or quotation marks) as in the example below. The words *if* and *that* often signal dialogue that is being reported rather than quoted.

The electronics executive said that computers can now speak with a Texas drawl.

390.3

To Set Off Interjections

A comma is used to separate an interjection or a weak exclamation from the rest of the sentence.

No kidding, you mean someday computers may be sewn into our clothing?

Yes, and don't be surprised if that piece of clothing reminds you about your dentist appointment and your homework assignments.

390.2

To Set Off Interruptions

Commas are used to set off a word, phrase, or clause that interrupts the main thought of a sentence. Such expressions usually can be identified through the following tests:

1. They may be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence.
2. They may be placed nearly anywhere in the sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence.

Computers, as we all know, are getting smaller. You may someday, for example, own a wristwatch computer.

390.4

In Direct Address

Commas are used to separate a noun of direct address from the rest of the sentence. (A noun of direct address is the noun that names the person spoken to in the sentence.)

Jill, listen to this. With a touch of a key, an interior decorator can change wallpaper and fabrics on his computer screen.

That's nothing, Jack. An architect can, with the touch of a key, see how light will fall in different parts of the building.

390.5

To Enclose Information

Commas are used to enclose a title, a name, or initials that follow a person's last name.

Melanie Prokat, M.D., and Gerald Sahn, Ph.D., admitted that they can't program their VCR's. Then Mereick, B., and Abrams, J. D., confessed that they can't either.

391.1

Between Two Independent Clauses

A comma may be used between two independent clauses that are joined by coordinate conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*.

Many businesses are selling their products on the Internet, and on-line buying has become popular with millions of people.

Avoid Comma Splices

A comma splice results when two independent clauses are “spliced” together with only a comma—and no conjunction. (See page 86.)

391.3

To Separate Adjectives

Commas are used to separate two or more adjectives that equally modify the same noun.

Many intelligent, well-educated scientists think that one of Jupiter’s 16 moons shows signs of life.

Intelligent and *well-educated* are separated by a comma because they modify *scientists* equally.

Note: No comma is used between the last adjective (*well-educated*) and the noun (*scientists*).

In 2004 scientists hope to send a space probe to this cold Jovian moon.

Cold and *Jovian* do not modify *moon* equally; therefore, no comma separates the two.

Use these tests to help you decide if adjectives modify equally:

391.2

To Separate Clauses and Phrases

A comma should separate an adverb clause or a long modifying phrase from the independent clause that follows it.

If everyone shops on the Internet, what will happen to shopping malls? [adverb clause]

According to the experts, shopping malls may one day be as hard to find as drive-in movie theaters. [long modifying phrase]

In time “mallng” may be just a fond memory of the good old days that you can tell your grandchildren about. [Commas are usually omitted after short introductory phrases, and when the adverb clause follows the independent clause.]

391.4

To Set Off Phrases

Commas are used to separate an explanatory phrase from the rest of the sentence.

English, the language computers speak worldwide, is also the most widely used language in science and medicine.

Cold and *Jovian* do not modify *moon* equally; therefore, no comma separates the two.

Use these tests to help you decide if adjectives modify equally:

1. Switch the order of the adjectives; if the sentence is clear, the adjectives modify equally.
2. Put the word *and* between the adjectives; if the sentence reads well, use a comma when *and* is taken out.

392.1

To Set Off Appositives

An appositive is a word or phrase that identifies or renames a noun or pronoun. (Do not use commas with restrictive appositives because they are necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence.)

COBOL, a programming language that is based on English words and phrases, was invented by Grace Hopper, a U.S. Navy admiral. [The two appositive phrases are set off with commas.]
U.S. Navy Admiral Grace Hopper invented COBOL.

[The restrictive appositive, *Grace Hopper*, is not set off because it's needed to make the sentence clear.]

392.2

To Set Off Nonrestrictive Phrases and Clauses

Commas are used to punctuate **nonrestrictive** phrases and clauses (those phrases or clauses that are not necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence).

Ninety-seven percent of the earth's water supply is contained in our oceans, and 2 percent is frozen. We get our water from the 1 percent that is left, which comes from the earth's surface or groundwater.

The clause—*which comes from the earth's surface or groundwater*—is additional information; it is nonrestrictive (not required). If the clause were left out, the meaning of the sentence would remain clear.

Restrictive phrases or clauses (those that are needed in the sentence) restrict or limit the meaning of the sentence and are not set off with commas.

Groundwater that is free from harmful liquids and chemicals is rare.

The clause—*that is free from harmful liquids and chemicals*—is restrictive; it is needed to complete the meaning in the basic sentence and is not, therefore, set off with commas.

393.1

To Join Two Independent Clauses

A semicolon is used to join two independent clauses that are not connected with a coordinate conjunction. (This means that each of the two clauses could stand alone as a separate sentence.)

My dad bought a robot-operated lawn mower; I was anxious to see the thing work.

393.4

To Separate Groups That Contain Commas

A semicolon is used to distinguish groups of items within a list.

Here's a list of things we should be recycling: aluminum cans; cardboard, newspapers, and other paper products; glass bottles, jars, and other glass items.

Certain items are still difficult to recycle: foam cups, plates, and cartons; plastic bags, diapers, and wrappers; used tires and chemicals.

See 436.3 for an explanation and examples of independent clauses.