

WRAC WORKSHOP COMMA USE

In general, commas are used to separate certain **part** of a sentence from the rest of the sentence. However, they are not strong enough punctuation marks to separate whole sentences (or independent clauses or complete thoughts) from each other; that is what periods, question marks, exclamation points, and semicolons are for. Probably the most serious misuse of commas is to confuse them with these stronger punctuation marks. If you don't understand anything else about comma use, remember this: **Don't use a comma anywhere where a period would make sense.**

So much for where not to use commas. What about where to use them? There are two very broad, general reasons to use a comma. These various uses of commas **can be** learned, and they are outlined and discussed below.

I. Commas are used to separate certain coordinate constructions within a sentence or clause.

Coordinate constructions are two words, phrases, or clauses of the same type which are independent of each other, which are equal in importance or emphasis, and which fulfill the same function within the sentence. Coordinate constructions requiring commas to separate them are:

A. Compound sentences consisting of two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Examples: I have no idea what a thesis or a conjunction is, yet I expect to get a passing grade in English.

Spring has arrived in Albuquerque, *and the winds have started to blow.*

I must remember my grandmother's birthday, *for she always remembers mine.*

NOTE: Compound **subject** or **predicates** or other **phrases** within a **simple sentence** are **NOT** separated by commas.

Examples: John knows nothing about punctuation *yet expect to pass his English final.*

Spring has arrived in Albuquerque *and has brough us daffodils and dust.*

I will send my grandmother flowers for her birthday *or take her out to dinner.*

B. Coordinate adjectives, which are two or more consecutive adjectives, each equally and independently modifying a following noun.

Examples: A *mysterious, handsome* stranger was staring at me from across the room.

The hikers descended into the *deep, damp, icy* cave.

The *tired, lonely* woman wore only a *light, black*, torn jacket in the snowstorm.

NOTE: A combination of two or more adjectives in which one is **subordinate** to another in a “modifying chain” is **NOT** separated by (a) comma(s).

Examples: A *frail old* man wearing a *light blue* robe stared at the visitors from across the hospital room.

The ring was set with a *deep reddish blue* stone.

The cake had a *thick whipped cream* topping.

C. A **series** of three or more of the same type of grammatical item, no matter what type of construction – word, phrase, or clause - - the three or more items represent.

Examples: My sister is trying to go out with every *Tom, Dick, and Harry* in Albuquerque!

We are going *over the river, through the woods, and to Grandmother’s house* for dinner.

The mayor *will personally paint over all the graffiti*, the City Council *will tear down every wall in Albuquerque*, or the Police Department *will place every male between the ages of ten and twenty in handcuffs* before we surrender to the graffiti vandals in our city.

II. Commas are used to set off NONESSENTIAL or NONRESTRICTIVE modifying phrases or clauses from the rest of the sentence.

“Nonessential” means that the information is not needed to identify the noun it modifies.

“Set off” means that the nonessential or nonrestrictive [“no-no”] phrase or clause is separated from everything else in the sentence by one or two commas, depending upon where in the sentence it occurs. If the information comes at the beginning of a sentence, it is followed by a single comma; if the information comes at the end of a sentence, it is preceded by a single comma; if the information is in the middle of a sentence, it is surrounded by two commas, one before it and one after it.

Information can be considered nonessential and nonrestrictive for one or more of the following reasons:

A. It is **redundant**, repetitious information put there only for emphasis.

Examples: My grandparents, the *parents of my own parents*, often give me double doses of affection.

People *that are grandparents* are often very affectionate towards young children.

Examples: My uncle, *Bill*, lives in Washington. [NOTE: I have only one uncle, so *Bill* is redundant.]

My uncle *Bill* lives in Washington. [NOTE: I have several uncles, so *Bill* is not redundant information.]

Examples: Elephants, *the largest land animals on earth today*, often weigh over 6000 pound.

The elephants *living on earth today* are much larger than the elephants *that lived on earth million of years ago*.

- B.** It is **extra information** which may be interesting but is not necessary to identify whatever it is that the clause or phrase is modifying.

Examples: President Kennedy, *a great fan of touch football*, was the youngest man ever elected to the U.S. presidency.

A person *who is a great fan of touch football* would probably enjoy spending an afternoon with the Kennedys.

Examples: I, *having nothing to eat*, sometimes do things I am not too proud of.

A man *having nothing to eat* will sometimes do things he not proud of.

Examples: Our hostess, *sitting next to me at the dinner table last night*, was a little bit drunk.

The woman *sitting next to me* at the dinner table last night was a little bit drunk.

- C.** It modifies something other than whatever precedes it in the sentence. In other words, it is **out-of-place**. [NOTE: Sometimes, there are good reasons for putting a modifier “out-of-place.”]

Examples: I lost my wallet, *dashing across the street*.

I accidentally hit a cat *dashing across the street*.

[NOTE: In the first sentence, the verbal phrase modifies the noun in front of it, *cat*, while in the second sentence, the same verbal phrase does **not** modify the noun in front of it, *wallet*, but, rather, modifies the verb, *lost*. So the first one is **not** set off by commas while the second one **is**.]

Examples: The horse plodded slowly into the barn for the last time, *broken down by years of giving rides and pulling plows*.

I saw a horse *broken down by years of giving rides and pulling plows*.

Examples: The nervous young man approached the statuesque woman, *trembling from head to toe*.
I felt sorry for the frightened woman *trembling from head to toe in front of the judge*.

- D.** It is **at the beginning** of the sentence (or clause), so there is nothing in front of it for it to modify in a restrictive or essential way.

Examples: *In the middle of English class*, I fainted. I fainted *in the middle of English class*.

Examples: *In order to make myself understood by everyone in the auditorium*, I spoke slowly and carefully.
I spoke slowly and carefully *in order to make myself understood by everyone in the auditorium*.

Examples: *While we were studying comma rules*, the English teacher was chattering on in front of the room about topic sentences.
The English teacher was chattering on in front of the room about topic sentences *while we were studying comma rules*.