

Use a comma to set apart an introductory word or phrase.

When a sentence doesn't begin with the subject but has instead an introductory word or phrase, a comma must separate the introduction from the rest of the sentence.

Despite his best efforts, the hero failed.

The comma goes between the introduction and the subject and must not separate the subject from the verb. Introductory elements often consist of prepositional phrases, subordinating conjunctions, participial phrases, or conjunctive adverbs. Phrases that begin with the following words often require a comma if they begin a sentence (this list is not exhaustive):

according to	because	despite	in order to	since	when	with
after	because of	due to	instead of	though	whenever	without
although	before	even though	like	toward	where	
as	besides	except for	once	unless	wherever	
at	between	if	rather than	until	while	

The following words usually have a comma immediately after them when they begin a sentence. Many adverbs that end in *-ly* and transitions at the beginning of a sentence need to be followed by a comma, too.

additionally	anyway	however	last	nevertheless	presently	thus
after all	consequently	in other words	likewise	next	regardless	undoubtedly
afterward	finally	in the end	meanwhile	of course	similarly	
again	first (2nd, etc.)	indeed	namely	on the contrary	still	
also	furthermore	instead	naturally	otherwise	therefore	

Finally, a comma must follow an introductory participial phrase. A participle is a verb ending in *-ing* that acts as an adjective. Participles are often used with the above introductory words, but they can also stand alone.

Sitting across the table from me, he asked a question.

When a verb immediately follows an introductory element, however, don't use a comma. Such a case occurs if the introduction is serving as the subject of the sentence or if the sentence uses inverted word order. A comma is sometimes optional after certain prepositional phrases, too. You can tell if you need a comma by whether you pause while reading the introductory element aloud. However, if you're in doubt, use a comma.

Running the race is the fulfillment of his dream.
 At night the stars come out.

After the race came the victory lap.

Use a comma to join a dependent clause to an independent clause when the dependent clause is first.

A dependent clause is a clause with a subject and verb that can't stand alone because of its first word (often one of the words from the first list above). If you were to say a dependent clause out loud, people would expect you to say more:

Because we jumped in the pool.

When a dependent clause begins a sentence, a comma must follow it:

Because we jumped in the pool, we were soaked.

Use a comma with a conjunction to join two independent clauses.

When you have two complete sentences—with two subjects and two verbs—you can't use only a comma to separate them. (When you do, it's called a comma splice.) You have to use a semicolon or a comma with a conjunction to join them, or

you can make them two sentences. When the two sentences are short and closely related, however, you can use only a comma between them. When in doubt, use a semicolon or a comma and conjunction.

He's very quiet, no one pays much attention to him.
He's very quiet, so no one pays much attention to him.
He's very quiet; no one pays much attention to him.

Use a comma to set apart nonrestrictive material.

Restrictive material restricts the meaning of the preceding noun:

Children who play with matches should be punished.

Here the statement refers only to children who play with matches. Compare:

Children, who play with matches, should be punished.

This statement refers to all children as children who play with matches, so it isn't restrictive. **The sentence would not change in meaning if you omitted the material enclosed by the commas**, which is the test as to whether something is **nonrestrictive**. If it would mean the same thing without a certain phrase, then you must enclose the phrase in commas. If the material is necessary for proper understanding, as in the first sentence, then you shouldn't use commas. Often students use commas to set apart material that should be restrictive, which leads to confusion. Be aware of this. Finally, "that" is better for restrictive material and "which" is better for nonrestrictive material.

The plant that thrives is fortunate. This project, which took her weeks to complete, is the best in the class.

Use a comma to set apart an appositive or an interrupting word or phrase.

An *appositive* is a word or phrase that repeats the preceding noun in different words, generally to amplify meaning. Anything that interrupts the sentence flow and that the sentence could do without should have a comma on both sides.

The cheetah, the fastest land animal, can reach speeds of seventy miles per hour.
I mean, wow, who would have guessed?

Use a comma to separate items in a sequence.

When you list three or more items, it's best to put a comma after every item except the last, including the one that precedes the "and" or the "or." This way you can avoid possible confusion.

Use a comma to separate adjectives or adverbs that modify the same word.

Modifiers that modify the same word need commas separating them if there are two or more and if you could sensibly put the word "and" between them.

It's a tall, impressive building. The unusual cardboard box was strangely shaped.

Use a comma to introduce some quotations.

When there is a direct speaker, use a comma to introduce direct quotations. A colon is used for other quotations and citations. However, a quotation can also be its own sentence or lie unpunctuated within a sentence.

The angry girl shouted at her younger brother, "Stay out of my room!"

Use a comma in dates, addresses, titles, academic degrees, and long numbers.

- After the day and, in a sentence, the year: On November 27, 1975, my big brother was born.
- After each part of an address: She's at 698 Norfolk Street, Holliston, Massachusetts, where she works.
- To indicate a person's title or degree: Julius Lombard, Ph.D., is my professor.
- After every three digits in a number: 5,980,672