

# Commas

## 13 Reasons Why

Lunch and Learn Writing 3

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# *What is a comma?*

**According to Plain English for Lawyers “...commas or (the lack of them) cause more mischief in the law than all of the other punctuation marks combined.” (85)**

**Definition:** A comma is a punctuation mark used to separate words, or groups of words, so that the meaning of the sentence is clear. Commas aid clarity, prevent ambiguity, and indicate where you need to pause. Often you can tell if you need a comma by reading your work out loud; however, punctuation is mainly for the eye, not the ear, so this method does not always work.



**Rule #1 Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.**

Words, Phrases, and Clauses in a series are usually separated by commas to show the reader where one item in the series ends and the next begins.

Indian Lake looked cold<sub>2</sub> gray<sub>2</sub> and calm this morning.

The chief justice was charged with usurping his power<sub>2</sub> taking bribes<sub>2</sub> and tax fraud.

## Rule #1 Continued – What is an Oxford Comma?

**An oxford comma, also called a serial comma, is the final comma in a list of things. It is called a stylistic choice, which means some style books require it and others do not. However, choosing NOT to use the Oxford Comma can cause much confusion in your writing.**

Among those interviewed were Merle Haggard's two ex-wives, Kris Kristofferson and Robert Duvall.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.

Highlights of Peter Ustinov's global tour include encounters with Nelson Mandela, an 800-year-old demigod and a dildo collector.

# Tails

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**Rule #2 Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet.**

**What is an independent clause again?**

**Group of words with a Subject & Verb. It can stand alone.**

**They charged the Chief Justice with usurping power,  
and they are investigating him for tax fraud.**

**NOTE: To join two independent clauses properly, you need both the comma and the conjunction. If you use only the comma, you will be guilty of a comma splice – a grievous sin.**

## **Rule #2 Continued**

**Find the grievous sins (comma splices) in the following sentences. How would you correct them?**

- 1. By the time they found who had hijacked the senator's computer, it was too late to do anything, they prayed he would be caught at the airport.**
- 2. The sabotage cost the government millions of hours of lost computer time, it also destroyed valuable resources, destroyed the security system, and made everyone question how this could have happened.**
- 3. No one seriously considered the man in the tall, brown hat a threat to security, they saw his work as competent, he was so unassuming no one remembered any details about him, other than his hat.**

**Rule #3 Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause.**

**At the time of the accident, the defendant was intoxicated.  
(Introductory phrase)**

**If you are not sure about this, let me know now.  
(introductory dependent clause)**

**Dependent clauses can often be identified by the use of dependent clause markers:**

- Because
- Since
- When
- While
- Until
- If
- As
- Though
- Although
- Unless
- After
- Before
- Once
- Whether



**Rule #4 Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential (nonessential) to the meaning of the sentence. If these words are dropped, the sentence will still make sense and retain its basic meaning.**

**Incorrect: Jill who is my sister shut the door.**

**Correct: Jill, who is my sister, shut the door.**

**Incorrect: The man knowing it was late hurried home.**

**Correct: The man, knowing it was late, hurried home.**

## Rule # 4 Continued

In the preceding examples, note the comma after *sister* and *late*. Nonessential words, clauses, and phrases that occur midsentence must be enclosed by commas. The closing comma is called an appositive comma. Many writers forget to add this important comma. Following are two instances of the need for an appositive comma with one or more nouns.

*Incorrect: My best friend, Joe arrived.*

*Correct: My best friend, Joe, arrived.*

*Incorrect: The three items, a book, a pen, and paper were on the table.*

*Correct: The three items, a book, a pen, and paper, were on the table.*

If something or someone is sufficiently identified, the description that follows is considered nonessential and should be surrounded by commas.

*Freddy, who has a limp, was in an auto accident.*

If we already know which Freddy is meant, the description is not essential.

*The boy who has a limp was in an auto accident.*

We do not know which boy is meant without further description; therefore, no commas are used.

**This leads to a persistent problem. Look at the following sentence:**

*Example: My brother Bill is here.*

**Now, see how adding two commas changes that sentence's meaning:**

*Example: My brother, Bill, is here.*

**Careful writers and readers understand that the first sentence means I have more than one brother. The commas in the second sentence mean that Bill is my only brother.**

**Why? In the first sentence, *Bill* is essential information: it identifies which of my two (or more) brothers I'm speaking of. This is why no commas enclose *Bill*.**

**In the second sentence, *Bill* is nonessential information—whom else but Bill could I mean?—hence the commas.**

**Comma misuse is nothing to take lightly. It can lead to a train wreck like this:**

*Example: Mark Twain's book, Tom Sawyer, is a delight.*

**Because of the commas, that sentence states that Twain wrote only one book. In fact, he wrote more than two dozen of them.**

**Rule #5 Use commas to separate two or more adjectives that describe the same noun when the word “and” can be inserted between them.**

*Example: He is a strong, healthy man.*

We could also say *healthy, strong man*.

*Example: We stayed at an expensive summer resort.*

We would not say *summer expensive resort*, so no comma.

Another way to determine if a comma is needed is to mentally put *and* between the two adjectives. If the result still makes sense, add the comma. In the examples above, *a strong and healthy man* makes sense, but *an expensive and summer resort* does not.

**Rule #6 Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates, addresses, and titles in names.**

**(If you use the two-letter capitalized form of a state, you do not need a comma after the state)**

**(If any part of the date is omitted, leave out the comma.)**

*Example: I'm from the Akron, Ohio, area.*

*Example: John lives in Birmingham, AL next to my parents.*

*Example: It was in the Sun's June 5, 2003, edition.*

**No comma is necessary for just the month and year.**

*Example: It was in a June 2003 article.*

## Rule # 6 Continued

Traditionally, if a person's name is followed by *Sr.* or *Jr.*, a comma follows the last name: *Martin Luther King, Jr.* This comma is no longer considered mandatory. However, if a comma does precede *Sr.* or *Jr.*, another comma must follow the entire name when it appears midsentence.

*Correct: Al Mooney Sr. is here.*

*Correct: Al Mooney, Sr., is here.*

*Incorrect: Al Mooney, Sr. is here.*

Similarly, use commas to enclose degrees or titles used with names.

*Example: Al Mooney, M.D., is here.*

## **Rule #7 Use commas to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence.**

*Examples:*

*He said, "I don't care."*

*"Why," I asked, "don't you care?"*

**If the quotation comes before *he said, she wrote, they reported, Dana insisted,* or a similar attribution, end the quoted material with a comma, even if it is only one word.**

*Examples:*

*"I don't care," he said.*

*"Stop," he said.*

## **Rule #8 Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.**

**Remember, the humble comma was invented for writers to tell their readers to slow down while reading a sentence. It is also important to use a comma to prevent confusion or misreading.**

*Writing clearly isn't easy.*

*Writing, clearly, isn't easy.*

**The comma can be a useful device for securing a pause or emphasis:**

**I am sure the contract will be signed, eventually.**

**Senior management had, once again, put itself in a no-win situation.**

**The end had come, but it was not yet in sight.**



**Rule # 9 Use commas before or surrounding the name or title of a person directly addressed. (Capitalize a title when directly addressing someone.)**

**Use commas to set off the name, nickname, term of endearment, or title of a person directly addressed.**

*Examples:*

*Will you, Aisha, do that assignment for me?*

*Yes, old friend, I will.*

*Good day, Captain.*

**Direct address doesn't need to involve a name. A title can be used in place of a name, as in the following examples:**

*Excuse me, sir, you dropped something.*

*Listen up, girls and boys!*

*Ladies and gentlemen, the play is about to begin.*

**Rule # 10 Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.**

**Example: I believe that's my jacket, isn't it?**

**You're Marvin from my old Denver neighborhood, aren't you?**

**Use a comma to separate contrasting parts of a sentence.**

**Example: That is my money, not yours.**

**That is a mountain lion, not a house cat.**

**Rule# 12 Use a comma when beginning sentences with introductory words such as well, now, or yes.**

*Examples:*

*Why, I can't believe this!*

*No, you can't have a dollar.*

# **Rule #13 Use commas surrounding words such as therefore and however when they are used as interrupters.**

**Use commas to set off expressions that interrupt the sentence flow (*nevertheless, after all, by the way, on the other hand, however, etc.*).**

*Example: I am, by the way, very nervous about this.*

*Consequently, the case did not go to trial.*

*In conclusion, I am not able to take your case based on the information you presented.*

## Quiz Time

- 1. I took Laura, the one with the thick ankles, to the movie last night.**
- 2. I took Laura the one with the thick ankles, to the movie last night.**
- 3. I took Laura, the one with the thick ankles, to the movie, last night.**
  
- 4. Sue left Albany, New York on January 15 of that year.**
- 5. Sue left Albany, New York, on January 15 of that year.**
- 6. Sue left Albany, New York on January 15, of that year.**
  
- 7. Although you may be right, I cannot take your word for it.**
- 8. Although you may be right I cannot take your word for it.**
- 9. Although, you may be right, I cannot take your word for it.**
  
- 10. She finished her work, and then, took a long lunch.**
- 11. She finished her work, and then took a long lunch.**
- 12. She finished her work and then took a long lunch.**

# Apostrophe

**Rule #1** A punctuation mark used to indicate possession.

**Rule #2** A punctuation mark used to indicate omission of letters or numbers.

**Example Rule #1:** John's book, duck's wing, people's choice, etc.

**Example Rule #2:** can't (The apostrophe indicates the letter "o" from the words "can not" is left out to make the contraction can't.)

**DO NOT USE AN APOSTROPHE WHEN MAKING A WORD PLURAL.**

Like a comma splice, using an apostrophe with an "s" when making a word plural is a grievous sin.

# A Final Thought

- Last month, Alex dated Mary Ann Lee and Kim.
- Last month, Alex dated Mary, Ann, Lee, and Kim.
- Last month, Alex dated Mary Ann, Lee, and Kim.

**How many women did Alex date?**

## Works Cited

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