

Conquering the Comma



Purdue OWL Writing Lab



What is a Comma?

A **comma** is a punctuation mark that indicates a pause is needed in a sentence.

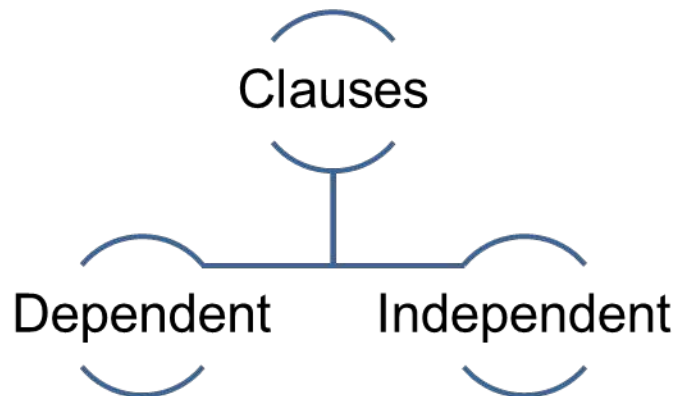


Commas help to clarify meaning for the reader.



Clauses and Phrases

A **clause** is a group of words that contains both a subject and a verb that complement each other.



A **phrase** is a group of words that does not contain a subject or a verb that complement each other.



Sentence Structure: Independent Clauses

A complete sentence has **at least** two components, a **subject** and a **verb**.

The subject and verb must form a complete thought to be considered an **independent clause**.

The couple dances.
subject (S) verb (v)



Sentence Structure: Compound Sentences

Compound Sentence: a sentence that contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction

A **conjunction** joins words, phrases, and clauses together in a sentence.

Conjunctions (remember with the acronym FANBOYS):

For And Nor But Or Yet So



Sentence Structure: Compound Sentence

The comma in a compound sentence is placed before the coordinating conjunction.

S **V**

Conj. **S** **V**

Andy **built** a snowman, **and** **Jeff** **played** with his dog.



Sentence Structure: Compound Sentence

Where would you place the comma in the following sentence?

S

V

S

V

Dan struggled with his homework so his father helped him.



Sentence Structure: Dependent Phrases

A **dependent clause** contains a subject and verb, but the clause cannot stand independently.

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



Sentence Structure: Dependent Phrases

Dependent phrases and clauses help to clarify and add detail to an independent clause.

Dependent clauses may appear at the **beginning**, **middle**, or **end** of a sentence.



Sentence Structure: Introductory Clauses

When a **dependent clause is placed at the beginning** of a sentence, place a comma between the independent clause and the dependent clause.

Dep. clause **S** **V**
Before he took the test, Dan struggled with his

Conj. **S** **V**
homework, **so his father helped** him.



Introductory Clause

Where would you place the comma in the following example?

Because it was raining **S** **V**
we decided to go to the movies.

Int Clause **S** **V**
Because it was raining, we decided to go to the movies.



Dependent Clauses

When a **dependent clause is located after an independent clause**, **do not** place a comma between the two.

S **V**
We decided to go to the movies **because** we were bored.



Essential Phrases and Clauses

An **essential clause** or phrase is used to modify a noun. It adds information that is critical to the meaning of the sentence.

Essential clauses are **not** set off by commas.

S **essential phrase** **V**
The **people who work in my office** **are** loud.



Essential Phrases and Clauses

The word “**that**” is almost always an indicator of an essential phrase or clause.

S **essential** **V**
The **tiramisu that I had at Joe’s** **was** great.



Non-essential Phrases and Clauses

A **nonessential clause** or phrase adds extra information to a sentence. This information can be eliminated from the sentence without influencing the meaning of the sentence.

Always place commas around nonessential phrases and clauses.

S **non-essential** **V**
My **brother, who lives across town,** **plans** to throw a party.



Use commas **to set off additional information:**

S **V**
Steve said that he would propose to me on
non-essential
Valentine's Day, which is my favorite holiday.



Comma Practice

Would you place commas in the following sentences? If so, where?

- I am planning a trip to Paris which is one of the greatest cities in the world.
- The place that I would most like to see is the Eiffel Tower.
- Pierre, who is one of my business contacts, will meet me at the airport.



Sentence Structure: Commas in a Series

Place commas in a sentence **to divide items in a list.**

The commas will help the reader to avoid confusion.

The comma before the conjunction is generally required, but it can be omitted if there is no possibility of confusion.



Sentence Structure: Commas in a Series

Consider the difference in the following:

- 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?



Sentence Structure: Commas in a Series

Commas should be **placed in series of words, phrases, or clauses.**

Place commas in the following sentences:

- Martina brushed her hair put on her pajamas and went to bed.
- She fell asleep and dreamed that she was a princess she kissed a frog and she rescued her prince.



Commas with Adjectives

Use commas **to separate adjectives** that provide an equal description of a noun. The test:

- Can you put “and” between the adjectives?
- Can they be described in reverse order?
- If yes, use a comma.

Big blue house | Three hungry kittens | A cranky, bald man



To Correct a Comma Splice

- Insert a conjunction between the two independent clauses

S **V** **Conj.** **S** **V**
Dan struggled with his homework, so his father helped him.

- Start a new sentence

S **V** **S** **V**
Dan struggled with his homework. His father helped him.

- Insert a semi-colon between the two independent clauses

S **V** **S** **V**
Dan struggled with his homework; his father helped him.



To Correct a
Comma Splice

How would you correct the following?

- This semester I am taking calculus physics and economics.
- Calculus is my best subject, I am certain I will get an A.
- Although I am very busy, I still find time to have fun.
- Last weekend my brother visited me and we went to a football game a party and a rock concert.



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The End

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Purdue OWL staff

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