

Rules for THE COMMA

Believe it or not, this little curved mark comes with a lot of rules for its usage. Learn them, and then become a more eloquent writer.

ONE: Commas are used to separate several adjectives.

Example: **The old, tattered, well-used book lay on the desk.**

NOTE We only use the comma if the order of the adjectives is interchangeable.

The old, dusty book OR The dusty, old book – Both work, so the comma is used.
The pretty winter cabin OR The winter pretty cabin – The second doesn't work, so they are clearly not interchangeable. Hence we don't use a comma.

TWO: Commas are used to separate items in a list.

Example: **The sauce contains flour, milk, butter and herbs.**

NOTE

There is much debate around whether to put a comma after the second last item in the list, before the conjunction ('and'). If you do include it, it is called the "Oxford comma".

THREE: To separate independent clauses, commas are used with coordinating conjunctions.

Example: **He was tired, so he went to sleep.**

NOTE

Be careful here! If you don't have the coordinating conjunction – *He was tired, he went to sleep* – then you will be guilty of a comma splice (which is incorrect in English).

FOUR: Commas are used to separate introductory elements in a sentence.

Example: **Although it was hot, he was still wearing his jacket.**

NOTE

Generally, if you start a sentence with the subordinate clause, followed by the main clause, you place a comma between the two. However, there are other types of introductory elements – see how this sentence starts?

FIVE: Commas are used to enclose an aside (a parenthetical element).

Example: **My father, who is a chef, never puts salt in his food.**

NOTE

Here, the commas function like parentheses (brackets) to give additional information. The words contained in the aside could be removed and the sentence would still make perfect sense.

SIX: Commas are used to separate direct speech or quotations.

Example: **John shouted, "Don't be a fool!"**
"I won't," I replied.

NOTE

You don't always need a comma if another type of punctuation mark is used. For example: *"Can you?" I asked.*

SEVEN: Commas are used to separate elements of contrast.

Example: **She appreciated his singing, not his dancing.**

