

Comma Rules

1. Use commas to separate items in a series.

The batter knocked the dirt off her cleats, put on a helmet, and took a couple of swings.

Tom Hanks, Sylvester Stallone, and Gene Hackman have all done voices for animated films.

The driver struggled to maneuver through traffic on the narrow, crowded, and winding road.

2. Use commas to separate two or more adjective preceding a noun.

The car nosed carefully through the narrow, crowded street.

The dark, mysterious stranger loomed in the doorway.

3. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet) when the conjunction joins independent clauses.

You may help yourself to the buffet, or you may order from the menu.

Seth wanted to play in the band, but he couldn't attend the required rehearsals.

4. Use a comma after introductory phrases or clauses.

Exhausted after four hours of strenuous hiking, the scouts took a break. *Exhausted after four hours of strenuous hiking* is an introductory participial phrase. A participle is a verb form used as an adjective.

In the first round of the golf tournament, I played against one of the best golfers in the state. *In the first round of the golf tournament* is an introductory prepositional phrase. NOTE: A single short introductory prepositional phrase does not require a comma unless the sentence is awkward to read without one.

After I had locked the car door, I remembered that the keys were still in the ignition. *After I had locked the car door* is an introductory adverb clause.

5. Use commas to set off nonessential (or nonrestrictive) appositives and appositive phrases. An *appositive* renames the noun or pronoun that comes before it.

Elephants, the largest mammals in Africa, are an endangered species.

Ana, a student at my school, lived in China for ten years.

Dr. Montero, the only pediatrician on staff, has office hours today.

The only pediatrician on staff, Dr. Montero, has office hours today.

My nephew Jamie recently graduated from college. In this sentence no commas are needed because *Jamie* is an essential appositive.

6. Use commas to set off nonessential subordinate clauses and nonessential participial phrases. A *nonessential* (or *nonrestrictive*) subordinate clause or participial phrase contains information that is not necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence.

Gloria, who lives next door, is my good friend.

Myron, sitting by the pond, thought about his future.

She returned all the books that she had borrowed from the library.

All students trying out for the track team should meet in room 212 after school.