

## Comma Rule Essentials: before, after, around, between

Our key words for understanding some of the most essential comma rules are *before*, *after*, *around*, and *between*.

### **Use a comma *BEFORE* a coordinating conjunction**

Place a comma BEFORE a coordinating conjunction. A coordinating conjunction joins two independent clauses, or simple sentences, creating a compound sentence.

*The boys ran down the street, **but** they could not catch the girl on the bike.*

Be careful *not* to place a comma before a conjunction that simply joins two words or phrases, such as compound subjects (*Tom and Jerry*), compound objects, (*cats or mice*), compound complements (*tired but happy*), or compound verbs (*ran and hid*).

### **Use a comma *BEFORE* extra information at the end of a sentence**

Place a comma BEFORE an extra-information phrase that comes at the end of a sentence:

*The boys ran down the street, **laughing and shouting**.*

*We hitchhiked into town, **tired and hungry after failing to find the car**.*

Careful—do *not* place a comma before a subordinate clause at the end of a sentence. Subordinate clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *if*, and *when*. See, no commas:

*Voter participation increased because voters were excited about their candidates.*

*You are more likely to give up when you run into difficulties if you have a fixed mindset.*

### **Use a comma *BEFORE* which (and sometimes who)**

*Which* always adds extra information to the end a sentence (a sentence almost never begins with *which*), so really this is the same rule as the one above. Similarly, place a comma before *who* if it adds extra, nonessential information (but be careful—see below):

*The girl sped off on her bike, **which was an old beach cruiser**.*

*The author argues that voter participation numbers rose, **which was a welcome development**.*

*Voters were excited, says the author, **who is a member of the Green Party**.*

Do *not* place commas before clauses that begin with *that*. The information in a *that* clause is needed to correctly identify part of the sentence. (*The boy that lost his shoe lost the race.*)

Be careful placing commas before clauses that begin with *who*. *Who* clauses might be essential to the proper meaning of the sentence. For example, the following *who* clause should not be separated from *reporter*:

*The reporter who stayed up all night watching election results soon realized results would be surprising.*

### **Use a comma *AFTER* an introductory word or word group**

Place a comma AFTER an introductory word, phrase, or clause. Introductory words include mild interjections, words of direct address, and signal words like *however* and *first*. Introductory phrases include longer prepositional phrases and adjective phrases.

*Oh, I don't think that's necessary.*

*Mr. Sanchez, are the timesheets ready?*

*On the other hand, the author claims the controversy increased voter participation.*

*According to the author, voter participation increased.*

*In the middle of the night, he woke to hear the dogs howling.*

*Tired and hungry, we searched for the car for almost an hour.*

Introductory clauses are those that begin with subordinating conjunctions (like *because, if, when*) and contain their own subject-verb pair. (Yes, you may begin a sentence with *because*.) The comma goes at the end of the clause.

*Because voters were excited about their candidates, voter participation increased.*

*If you have a fixed mindset, you are more likely to give up when you run into difficulties.*

### **Use commas AROUND interrupting word groups**

Place commas AROUND words and word groups that interrupt the main thought. Introductory words (see above) can sometimes be placed in the middle of an independent clause, interrupting it and splitting it in two. These interruptions are set off by commas on both sides.

*The author, however, claims it increased voter participation.*

*The boys ran, laughing and shouting, down the street.*

*The bike, which was an old beach cruiser, rattled as it sped away.*

*The voters, who turned out in large numbers, were excited about their candidates.*

Do *not* place commas around clauses that begin with *that*. The information in a *that* clause is needed to correctly identify part of the sentence (*The boy that lost his shoe sprained his ankle*).

### **Use commas BETWEEN items in a series**

Place commas BETWEEN items in a series of three or more. Also place commas between geographical names such as cities, states, and nations.

*My parents, a brother, and a niece all live in Stevensville, Montana.*

*In August we'll visit Santiago de Compostela, Spain.*

Commas separate the elements in addresses, too (except the ZIP code), and titles that *follow* names.

*Mr. Prager, College Success Center Supervisor, works at Yuba College, 2088 North Beale Road, Marysville, California 95901.*

Do *not* place commas between a title and name if the title comes first: *CSC Supervisor James Prager*.

Using commas is not quite so rigid an exercise as you might think. Some commas are optional, and you can find many examples of published material that violate one or more comma rules. For more complete information on comma rules, check a grammar reference such as Longman's or Penguin's or an English grammar reference site such as Diana Hacker's.

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*



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