

The Comma is Your Friend

By Deatri King-Bey

One of the most misused pieces of punctuation is the comma. If you litter your manuscript with comma errors, many editors will toss your submission into the round file. At the conclusion of this workshop, you should feel comfortable enough to consider the comma your friend. Sorry, but there is no fun way to do this. Get comfortable, and let's learn about commas.

NOTE: A main clause is the section of the sentence that could stand alone as a complete sentence.

Common Comma Errors

Comma splice

A comma splice is when you have two main clauses separated by a comma. Do not trust grammar check, it will not always catch a comma splice. For example, I put a comma splice in the previous sentence that my grammar check misses.

To solve a comma splice, you should either use a period, a semi-colon, or a comma + a coordinating conjunction (and but for nor or so yet).

Do not trust grammar check. It will not always catch a comma splice.

Do not trust grammar check; it will not always catch a comma splice.

Do not trust grammar check, for it will not always catch a comma splice.

Fused sentence

A fused sentence is when two or more main clauses are connected without any punctuation. Below is an example of a fused sentence that my grammar check misses.

Do not trust grammar check it will not always catch a fused sentence.

Run on sentence

Do you know anyone who talks all the time, and you wish they would be quiet a few seconds, but you know they think they will die if they are quiet for longer than a breath, yet you still pray for a miracle, so now you are stuck listening to them go on and on.

The above is a run on sentence. Grammatically correct. Punctuation correct. The only problem is, it runs on and on.

Use a Comma...

To separate main clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction

(and but for nor or so yet)

(main clause), (coordinating conjunction) (main clause).

The run on sentence gives several examples of how to use the comma along with a coordinating conjunction to separate main clauses. The exception to the rule is if you have a short sentence. In that case, the comma is optional.

The milk spilled and the baby cried. The milk spilled, and the baby cried.

When in doubt, throw in the comma.

To set off most introductory elements

An introductory element can be a clause, expression, or phrase that introduces the main clause. When speaking, these usually require a pause.

(introductory clause), (main clause).

When I felt sleepy, I went to bed.

Running, he tripped over the garden hose.

Note: A comma is not required for a short introductory phrase, but it is usually added for clarity.

To set off non-essential elements

A non-essential element is a word or phrase that interrupts the sentence and does not affect the meaning of the sentence. The best way to recognize a non-essential element is by moving it within the sentence.

(non-essential element), (main clause).

(portion of main clause), (non-essential element), (remainder of main clause).

(main clause), (non-essential element).

Surprisingly, comma usage isn't too difficult to learn.

Comma usage, surprisingly, isn't too difficult to learn.

Comma usage isn't too difficult to learn, surprisingly.

To set off non-essential supplementary information

Supplementary information adds detail to your sentence and can be either restrictive (which means you must have it in order for the sentence to make sense) or non-restrictive (non-essential). Only use commas with non-essential supplementary information.

For example:

(portion of the sentence), (non-essential supplementary information), (remainder of sentence)

I wrote a tutorial about commas, which took me two hours to write, for the online conference.

If you took out the non-essential supplementary information, the sentence would not lose any meaning.

Here is an example using restrictive supplementary information.

The authors who took writing seriously rose to great heights.

If you took out the supplementary information, the sentence would lose its meaning.

The authors rose to great heights. Which authors?

To separate items in a list

Separate a series containing three or more **equally important** words, phrases, or clauses with **commas**. The last item should also have a **coordinating conjunction** preceding it.

The comma preceding the coordinating conjunction is optional in creative writing but mandatory in most academic writing. Whether you choose to use the final comma or not, be sure to be consistent throughout your manuscript. Below are examples:

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To separate coordinate adjectives

Use coordinating conjunctions or **commas** to separate two or more **adjectives** that **modify the same noun** if you can change the order of the adjectives without changing the meaning.

She was a **warm, loving person**. She was a **loving, warm person**.

Notice in the above example you could easily switch the order of the adjectives. If you have a sentence where you could not switch the adjectives, then do not separate them with a comma.

She asked for the **new registration form**.

To set off contrast elements

When words, phrases, or clauses are used to show a sharp **contrast** or **what is not**, place a **comma** between the elements. The best way to understand this rule is to see it in action.

The roller coaster ride was **fun, and scary**.

He is **from Nigeria, not from Liberia**.

Note: When using the word **but** to show contrast, the **comma is optional** if you do not have a main clause on both sides of the **but**. Just make sure you are consistent throughout your paper:

The roller coaster ride was **fun but scary**. The roller coaster ride was **fun, but scary**.

To set off tags sentences

A tag sentence is a short sentence/statement that conveys an opinion and is placed at the end of the main sentence. Place a **comma** between the **main sentence** and the **tag sentence/statement**.

We have two more weeks of class, **I think**.

How many weeks of class are left, **two**?

To set off direct address

When directly addressing someone or a group, set it off with commas.

(**direct address**), (main clause).

(main clause), (**direct address**).

(portion of main clause), (**direct address**), (rest of main clause).

Betty, hand me the deck of cards. **Children**, be quiet.

Hand me the deck of cards, **Betty**. Be quiet, **children**.

When you're finished shuffling the cards, **Betty**, let me know.

To set off a non-essential appositive

An appositive is a word or phrase that renames the noun directly preceding it.

noun, **non-essential appositive**, rest of sentence.

Deatri King-Bey, **the author of this tutorial**, is from Illinois.

To prevent misreading

Sometimes a comma is needed to prevent misreading or add clarity to a sentence. When using this rule, ensure you actually needed to.

Running, he tripped over the garden hose.