

# Commas and the Commotion They Cause: How to Use These Handy Pieces of Punctuation Correctly

Updated for the Writers Lab by Sherri Wahrer



Here in the Writers Lab, we tutors and instructors hear a familiar lament from many students: that comma usage really gives them a headache. "Figuring out when and when not to use them is a pain," one student mentioned. "There are a lot of places where you can use them, but there are also a lot of areas where it's not right to use them, and you get marked off for it," another said. In general, commas are used to make a sentence clearer and easier to read; they set off introductory and important phrases, they set off items in a list, they set off adjective clauses, etc. In truth, commas are pretty handy pieces of punctuation (though it's important to not overuse them). Hopefully, the examples on this handout will give you a good idea of where comma usage is appropriate (and needed).

## Use commas to set off introductory phrases/clauses:

- Trying to finish her art project, Jen worked until 3:00 a.m.
- After several hours of conversation, the two friends finally left the coffeehouse.
- According to the man, the clerk in the convenience store was rude.

## Use commas before coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet):

- He gave millions of dollars to charity, and he was left with nothing.
- Cassie doesn't participate in class discussions much, but she is still a diligent student.
- Matt does not like green peppers on pizza, so he picked them all off.

## Use commas to set off items in a series or list:

- Her new apartment is spacious, elegant, and expensive.
- Tom, Rick, Dave, and Steve have known each other since high school.
- The following counties had tornado warnings yesterday: Lucas, Ottawa, Sandusky, and Wood.

## Use commas before and after interrupters (words or groups of words that add meaning to a sentence...sometimes adjective clauses):

- Her fiancé, who is an artist, sells many of his paintings.
- Douglas, on the other hand, did not agree with Alex's approach to solving the problem.
- Tricia's sister, who is sixteen, received a car from her parents for her birthday.

## Notice how comma usage changes the meaning of the following sentence:

- The neighbors who have dogs that bark should move. [This sentence implies that all neighbors owning barking dogs should move.]  
versus...
- The neighbors, who have dogs that bark, should move. [This sentence, on the other hand, implicates a specific set of neighbors.]

Because it is possible for a sentence's intended meaning to be corrupted through comma use, pay close attention to where you put those little helpers!