

10 Rules for Using Commasⁱ

1. **Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, nor, yet, so, for) that separates two independent clauses.**

There are eighty people in the room, but I do not think they are all planning on eating the buffet.

2. **Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clauses that come before a main clause.**

Strangely, no one has suggested fixing the switch.

Despite the immigrant's high hopes, their dreams were often unrealized.

3. **Use commas around words, phrases, and clauses in the middle of a sentence when they aren't essential to the meaning of the sentence.**

Numerous studies, however, have shown that negative reinforcement affects self-image more extensively than does positive reinforcement.

Karl Marx, and important nineteenth-century sociologist, believed in his role as a social thinker to change the world.

4. **Use commas between items in a series.**

The frigid, snowy, windy day was typical of Minnesota in January.

Three reasons for the closing were insufficient funds, poor instructional materials, and inadequate funds.

5. **Use commas to separate coordinating adjectives.**

Coordinating adjectives are adjectives in a series that can be rearranged in any order and could be (but are not) strung together using "and."

A rusty, dented, broken-down car was left behind.

6. **Use commas before and after a quotation within a sentence.**

“Cooperation between government and industry,” the President said, “must exist if the country is to prosper.”

The author stated, “One must seek to discover.”

7. Use a comma before an afterthought or contrasting element.

We are indebted to our forefathers, far more so than generations before us.

8. Use commas to set off geographical names, items in date, and professional titles.

The speaker was from Atlanta, Georgia.

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky.

Stephanie Glenn, PhD, will be the main speaker at the banquet.

9. Use commas to set off conjunctive adverbs used as transitional devices.

Conjunctive adverbs: *include, however, therefore, consequently, thus, furthermore, on the other hand, in general, and in other words.*

Your watch indicates that we are on time. My watch, however, indicates that we are 2 minutes late.

10. Use commas with markers of direct address.

Words that indicate you are talking to someone (yes/no, the reader’s name, question tags, or mild indicators “well” or “oh”)

Yes, I am going to look for brown boots today.

Oh, I don’t know.

We are doing quite well, don’t you think?

Watch out for COMMA SPLICES!

Comma splices – joining two independent clauses with a comma and no conjunction

~~She went to the bank, I went to the market.~~

She went to the bank, **and** I went to the market.

Practice: Add or delete commas if necessaryⁱ.

1. I had the pleasure of talking to a woman who had just returned from India where she had lived for ten years.
2. The gentleman waiting for the prescription is Mr. Rowe.
3. Mr. Mundy was born July 22, 1939 in Arkansas, where his family had lived for four generations.
4. One substitute for CFC's has environmentalists concerned because it contains chlorine which is also damaging to the ozone layer.
5. We pulled into the first apartment complex we saw, and slowly patrolled the parking lots.
6. "The last flight" she said with a sigh "went out five minutes before I arrived at the airport.
7. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is the home of several fine colleges and universities.

Answers:

1. I had the pleasure of talking to a woman who had just returned from India, where she had lived for ten years.
2. The gentleman, waiting for the prescription, is Mr. Rowe. *Correct as is, but can add commas*
3. Mr. Mundy was born July 22, 1939, in Arkansas, where his family had lived for four generations.
4. One substitute for CFC's has environmentalists concerned because it contains chlorine, which is also damaging to the ozone layer.
5. We pulled into the first apartment complex we saw and slowly patrolled the parking lots.
6. "The last flight," she said with a sigh, "went out five minutes before I arrived at the airport.
7. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the home of several fine colleges and universities.

ⁱ <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/punct/comma.html>

ⁱⁱ Hacker, Diana. Rules for Writers. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. 250, 256-7.