

A User's Guide to Commas

Comma splices? Misplaced modifiers? Appositives? Sometimes it seems that the terminology about commas is more confusing than the commas themselves.

So ... what is a comma?

A comma is a visual representation of a logical separation of information. Generally, commas add information to a sentence, separating that “extra” stuff from the rest of the sentence.

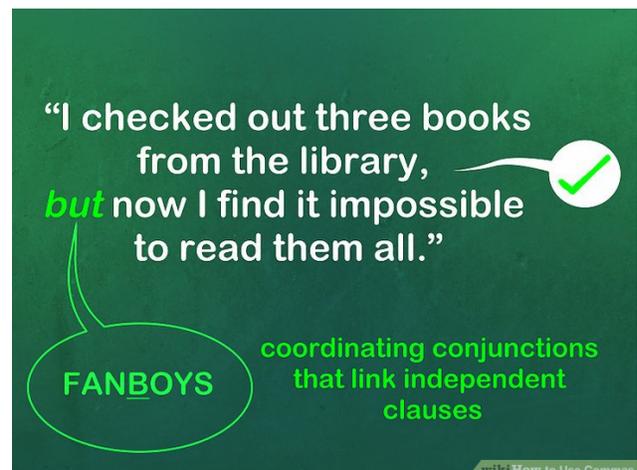
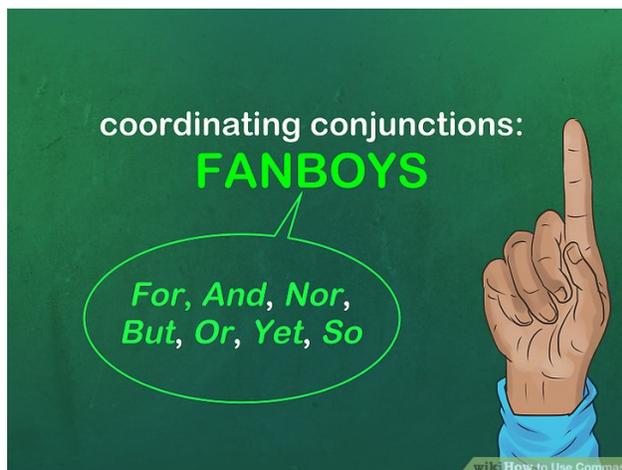
Take a basic sentence like “The Avengers work hard to protect innocent citizens.”

It is logical, but it doesn't have very much information in it. Commas allow us to signal that we are adding extra information into a sentence, like this:

The Avengers, **a diverse and often comical group of superheroes**, work hard to protect innocent citizens.

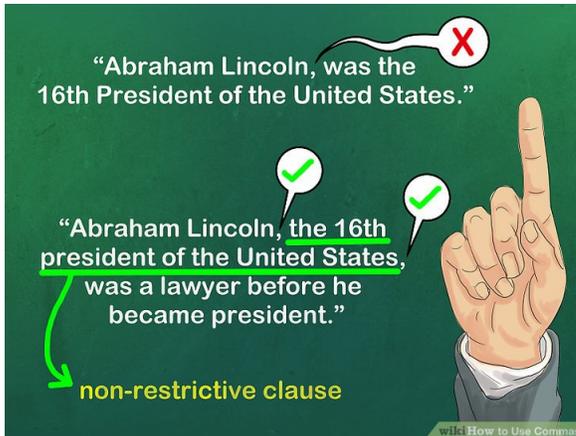
Here is a guide some common ways to use commas.

1. Use commas when you have two full thoughts in a sentence that are joined by a word like **and**, **so**, **but**, etc. The comma goes before the “joiner word” (conjunction). Common joiner words are **For**, **And**, **Nor**, **But**, **Or**, **Yet**, **So**, which spell FANBOYS.



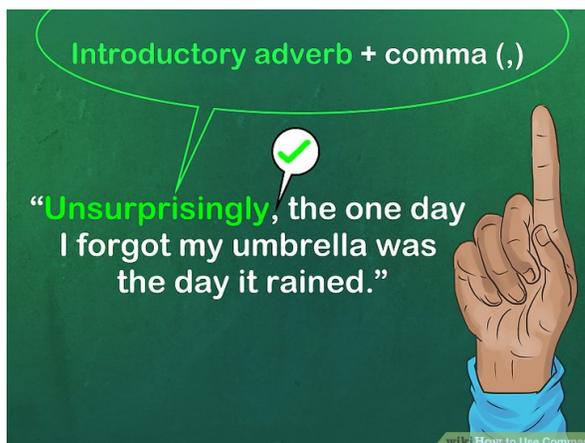
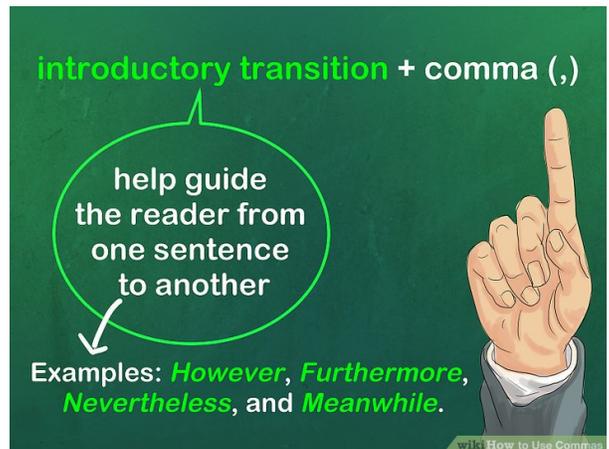
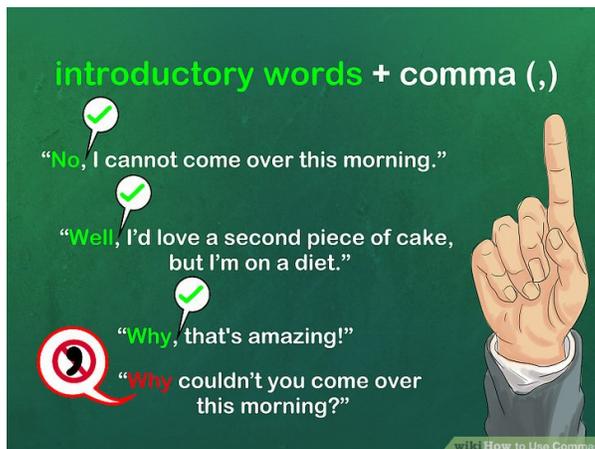
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2. Use a **pair of commas** to set off a **nonessential element (also called “non-restrictive clause”)** that occurs in the **middle of a sentence** or a **comma before a nonessential element at the end of a sentence**. A nonessential element is a piece of information that does not affect the meaning of a sentence. The sentence still makes sense without it.



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3. “Use commas **after introductory clauses, phrases, or words** that come **before the main clause**” (Driscoll and Brizee). Here are some examples.



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4. Use commas to separate **three or more items listed** in a sentence:

Things in a list or series

✓ “At the store I will buy apples, oranges, pears, and bananas.”

✗ “At the store I will buy, apples, oranges, pears, and bananas, to make fruit salad tonight.”

✗ “Kyle *and* Spike *and* Brenda *and* Willow all went to the concert.”

✓ “You have a choice of two breakfasts: granola, orange juice, and coffee, which is fairly cheap; or bacon, sausage, and eggs, which is more expensive.”

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5. “Use commas to separate **two or more coordinate adjectives** that describe the same noun” (Driscoll and Brizee).

adjectives of equal weight that independently modify a noun

✓ “People who purposefully misuse grammar are *brutish, irresponsible, mean-spirited* troglodytes who mangle our *beautiful, versatile* language.”

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6. “Use commas to set off all **geographical names, items in dates ... and addresses ...**, and **titles in names**” (Driscoll and Brizee):

On **May 4, 2012**, I saw *The Avengers* at the movie theater in **Toledo, Ohio**, with my friend Roger Benner, **MD**.

7. Use commas to separate a **direct quotation** from the rest of the sentence **when using a signal verb** like *asks*, *says*, or *replies*:

Loki dismisses Captain America, calling him “The soldier. A man out of time.”
Captain America wittily **replies**, “**I’m not the one who’s out of time.**”

8. “Use commas whenever necessary to **prevent possible confusion** or misreading” (Driscoll and Brizee):

When Stark goes out to **eat, his friends** join him. vs. When Stark goes out to **eat his friends** join him. (Stark wants to eat shawarma, not his friends.)

9. Use commas **before, after, or surrounding** the name or title of a person **being directly addressed**, depending on where the name/title is positioned in the sentence:

End of sentence: How do you control your temper, **Dr. Banner**?
Beginning of sentence: **Dr. Banner**, how do you control your temper? Middle of sentence: How, **Dr. Banner**, do you control your temper?

10. Use a comma to separate a **statement from a question**:

Agent Natasha Romanoff cleverly outmaneuvered Loki when it came to mind games, **didn’t she?**

11. Use a comma to separate **contrasting parts of a sentence**:

The Avengers believe technology should be used for good, **not** evil.

12. Use commas **to surround words such as “therefore” and “however”** when they are **used as interrupters**:

Loki, **however**, has no problem using the Tesseract for his own destructive purposes.

Work Cited

Driscoll, Dana, and Allen Brizee. “Extended Rules for Using Commas.” *The Purdue OWL*.

Purdue U Writing Lab, 3 April 2013. Web. 18 June 2015.