Microlab 3A – Comma Usage Handout

Placed correctly, commas help to create clear meaning. Placed incorrectly, commas can distort meaning and confuse readers.

This module will help you
- understand the many uses of the comma
- recognize comma errors
- repair comma errors

Review of Commas

The comma has the most uses of any punctuation mark in the English language.

Commas serve two basic functions in a sentence. Some commas separate a word, phrase, or clause from the rest of the sentence. Other commas enclose a word, phrase, or clause that is not essential to the central meaning of the sentence.

Commas that separate:

I. Use a comma to separate independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (such as “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” “for,” “yet,” “so”), or a correlative conjunction (“either . . . or,” “or neither . . . nor”). The comma goes before the conjunction.

Incorrect: The clown act was familiar yet it always brought laughs.
Correct: The clown act was familiar, yet it always brought laughs.

Sometimes the comma between two independent clauses is essential to prevent misreading.

Incorrect: The animals quickly got used to the fenced yard and the pig seemed like a pet.
Correct: The animals quickly got used to the fenced yard and the pig seemed like a pet.

When very short independent clauses (two or three words) are joined by a coordinating conjunction and there is no possibility of misreading the sentence, you do not need to use a separating comma.

Correct: Birds sang and bees hummed.
Correct: I walked and Frank rode his bike.

II. Use a comma to separate introductory words or phrases from the rest of the sentence.
Correct: Before leaving, Dallas Henderson put on an unforgettable party.
Incorrect: Before leaving, Dallas Henderson put on an unforgettable party.

When a sentence contains a very short introductory phrase, the comma may be omitted only if the meaning of the sentence is clear without the comma.

Clear: By tomorrow, the race will be over.
Clear: By tomorrow the race will be over.

III. Where three or more items occur in a list (called a “series”), commas should separate each item.
Also place a comma before the “and” that precedes the last item in the series.
Correct: Glistening behind the thick glass were diamonds, rubies, and sapphires.

With a series of phrases, three or more phrases in a series are separated by commas.
Correct: The catalog described tools for the shop, furniture for the home, and items for the office.
With a series of clauses, three or more clauses in a series are also separated by commas.

Correct:  \textit{Fans cheered, flags waved, and fireworks exploded.}

IV. Use commas to separate parts of dates, items in addresses, and titles that follow names.

\textbf{Dates}

Commas that separate the day, the date of the month, and the year.

Correct:  \textit{On Saturday, August 6, 1981, my family first came to this country.}

\textbf{Addresses}

Commas separate the name, street address, city name, and state name.

Correct:  \textit{Last year I worked for ATC Enterprises, 208 Gilmore Street, Baltimore Maryland 21233.}

Notice that a comma should not be used between the state and the zip code.

\textbf{Titles}

Commas separate titles and degrees that follow names.

Correct:  \textit{Rita Ortiz, Ph.D., invited the audience to ask questions.}

If the title precedes the name, no comma is used.

Correct:  \textit{Vice President Tony Frangillo read the startling report.}

V. Use commas to separate expressions like “he said” and “she answered” from a direct quotation. A comma that follows a direct quotation belongs inside the quotation marks.

Correct:  \textit{“Leave the rest,” he said, “to the police department.”}

Correct:  \textit{She asked, “Which door is the exit?”}

Notice that no comma is used when a direct quotation ends with its own punctuation.

Correct:  \textit{“Sound the alarm!” he shouted.}

VI. Use commas to enclose groups of words that provide additional information not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

\textbf{Basic sentence:}  \textit{The oil painting bore a famous artist’s signature.}

\textbf{Additional information:}  \textit{stored in the attic for years}

\textbf{Combined with commas:}  \textit{The oil painting, stored in the attic for years, bore a famous artist’s signature.}

The portion of this sentence enclosed by commas is called a nonrestrictive phrase. A nonrestrictive phrase gives additional information that does not affect the basic meaning of the sentence. In fact, the nonrestrictive phrase could be removed, and the sentence would still make sense.

VII. A group of words that provides descriptive or identifying information essential to the basic meaning of the sentence should not be enclosed by commas.

Correct:  \textit{Students who keep up with reading assignments do well on finals.}

The underlined portion of this sentence tells us which students do well on finals and is therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence. (Notice how the meaning changes when the underlined words are omitted from the sentence.)

Correct:  \textit{The car that I bought last year continues to run well.}

The phrase “that I bought last year” tells us which car runs well.
These identifying groups of words are called restrictive phrases. They limit or restrict the meaning of the sentence by providing identifying information.

Remember: Restrictive phrases and clauses begin with the word "that" (not "which") and are not enclosed by commas.

Correct: The boat that comes in first will win a prize.

VIII Use a pair of commas to enclose nonessential words that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Correct: None of the trees, however, suffered damage.

Correct: Her best dancing, in fact, came early in her career.

IX Use commas to enclose the names of people addressed directly by the sentence.

Correct: Few of us agree, George, that resignation is the answer.

George is the person spoken to, or addressed directly, in this sentence, so his name is set off by commas.

Correct: Regular practice, Sally, brings steady improvement.

In this sentence, Sally is being addressed directly, so her name is set off by commas.

Key Points to Remember

1. Commas are used to separate parts of a sentence such as:
   * joined by a coordinating conjunction
   * introductory words or phrases
   * items, phrases, or clauses in a series
   * parts of dates, addresses, and titles that follow a name
   * words in a direct quotation like "he said"