



Tips on Comma Usage

Commas are often overlooked, but they have an important function in your sentences. Excessive use or lack of commas can, in fact, distract from the intended meaning and cause confusion for the reader. As you revise, keep in mind the following tips.

Useful parts of speech that will help you determine the use of commas

Independent Clause (IC). An IC is a sentence that follows the subject-verb-object (SV-O) structure. It conveys the main idea:

E.g., *We write the book chapter.*

Dependent Clause (DC). A DC is a subordinate clause that starts with a subordinating conjunction (e.g., while, before, because), and is followed by the SV-O. A DC alone does not express full meaning, and if followed by a period, it creates a fragment.

E.g., *While we write the book chapter*

Phrase: A phrase is a group of words with no SV-O structure:

E.g., *During the writing process*

Introductory phrases: Place a comma after the introductory phrase, before the IC.

E.g., *At the end of the study, the participants expressed further interest in follow-up interviews.*

Phrases from reduced, non-essential clauses: When adjective clauses are reduced, you are left with a phrase. Add a comma when the information in the adjective clause is non-essential.

E.g., *The study by Banner Hospital, conducted over a period of 3 years, examined the new drug.*

Commas in a list:

Parallel structures reflect a list of items that are presented in a consistent manner (nouns, adjectives, phrases, clauses). Use a semi-colon if the items in the list are DCs or ICs.

E.g., *We hope to complete the proposal this week, complete the revisions next week, and submit the IRB by the end of this month.*

Quotations: Include a comma after introductory verbs and capitalize the first letter of the quote. If the quote fits with the flow of your sentence, omit the comma and do not capitalize.

E.g., *Bothello and Roulet (2019) explain, "There is a growing sense of anxiety and self-doubt about the legitimacy of our profession" (p. 854).*





E.g., Bothello and Roulet (2019) point out that “although imposter syndrome is common in many professions, we consider that certain characteristics intrinsic to management in academia progressively intensify this condition” (p. 854).

Comma splices: A comma splice takes place when two ICs are connected with a comma only and no coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so, also known as FANBOYS). To revise, include a comma and a FANBOYS after the first IC; use a period or semi-colon followed by a transition word and a comma before the SV-O, or a dependent clause marker.

Comma splice: We did not finish the research this month, it took longer than expected.

Revised: We did not finish the research this month, but it took longer than expected.

Revised: We did not finish the research this month. However, it took longer than expected.

Revised: We did not finish the research this month; however, it took longer than expected.

Revised: We did not finish the research this month because it took longer than expected.

Run-ons: A run-on takes place when two ICs are not connected with any comma or coordinating conjunction. You can revise a run-on in the same way you correct a comma splice.

Run-on: We wanted to finish the research this month it took longer than expected.

Linking dependent and independent clauses with adverb clauses:

When the DC starts the sentence with a subordinating conjunction, use a comma before the IC. If the follows the IC, do not include a comma. Note that it is incorrect to place a comma directly after a subordinating conjunction.

E.g., If the DC starts the sentence, include a comma before the S-V of the IC.

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Subordinating Conjunctions start a DC	Transition Words/Phrases usually start an IC
After	However,
Although	Thus,
As	Besides,
Because	Then,
Before	Certainly,
If	Finally,
Since	In addition,
Though	In contrast,

