



WRITING CENTRE

Commas are used to divide or separate parts of a sentence in order to make the meaning clear and the sentence easier to read. They mark a brief pause in the sentence, usually at a point where you would pause if you were speaking rather than writing. They may be used to separate individual words or phrases within the sentence. Some examples of the main types of usage are given below.

USING COMMAS TO SEPARATE ELEMENTS IN A SERIES

Commas are used to separate the individual words or phrases that make up a series of three or more items.

The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Commas are often used before the last item in a list. This is not always necessary but it can help avoid confusion. Both versions of the following sentence have the same meaning.

The colors of the rainbow are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

The colors of the rainbow are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

The following two sentences however, seem to have two different meanings.

I would like to thank my parents, John, and Susan.

I would like to thank my parents, John and Susan.

In the first sentence, the speaker is thanking their parents and two other people. The second sentence suggests that John and Susan are the speaker's parents.

REMEMBER

When in doubt, speak your sentences aloud and listen for the pauses in your speech. Commas should take the place of these pauses in your written English. When you have finished writing a sentence, read it aloud again, pausing briefly at each comma. If the sentence flows badly, you may have too many commas. Use the comma purposefully. Do not link sentences together if their meanings are not directly related to each other. It's often necessary to divide a very long sentence into two or more separate sentences.

SEPARATING THE PARTS OF A SENTENCE

Commas are used to separate an introductory word or phrase from the main sentence, or to separate a word or phrase that briefly interrupts the flow of the sentence. In the examples below, the introductory and interrupting words or phrases have been italicised.

Numerous studies, however, prove that the theory is inaccurate.

The same treatment, *according to most doctors*, can be given to all patients suffering from this ailment.

At first, the dye is green, but it soon turns red.

Similarly, commas are used to separate an afterthought or a final phrase that contrasts with the main part of the sentence.

The marathon was extremely challenging for Richard, far more than it was for Taylor.

Avoid overusing the comma, as this can make the sentence difficult to read and understand. Read your sentences aloud to check that the pauses are in the most helpful places.

USING COMMAS TO LINK SIMPLE SENTENCES

A series of short, simple sentences can be jerky and tedious to read.

The University is large. It is close to the town centre. There are special rooms available. Advance reservation is necessary.

A way of improving the flow of the writing is to link sentences with a comma together with a linking word (a co-ordinating conjunction) such as **and**, **but**, **so**, or, **nor** or **yet**.

*The University is large, **and** it is close to the town centre. There are special rooms available, **but** advance reservation is necessary.*

A comma **cannot** be used on its own to join two sentences. The following two sentences are grammatically correct, but they would read better if joined.

The people were proud of their country. They were willing to die for it.

These sentences cannot be joined by using a comma on its own, as the comma shows only a pause, not a link. A comma together with a coordinating conjunction joins the sentences correctly.

*The people were proud of their country, **and** they were willing to die for it.*