

Using Commas

This resource describes the most common situations requiring the use of a comma.

Commas are used:

To separate items in a series

Use commas to separate a series of three or more words or phrases. For example:

- *The dominant approaches in twentieth century psychology were structuralism, functionalism, behaviourism, and cognitive psychology.*
- *Architecture has been interested historically in conversations about function, form, and the relationship between function and form.*

To separate an introductory phrase or clause from the main portion of a sentence

Unless an introductory phrase is very short, a comma should follow it. For example:

- *In light of the new developments in medical research, Buchanan's later work went in a new direction.*
- *After Jaglom met Welles once, he knew it would be necessary to record the conversations.*

After a very short introductory phrase, the comma may be omitted if the meaning of the sentence remains clear. For example:

- *During lunch the entire matter was considered and rejected.*
- *By mid-century there were still no obvious signs of the dangers embedded within the legislation.*

To connect independent sentences

Place a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet*) between two sentences to show the relation between them. For example:

Sentence 1: *Alternative policies have informed recent decisions.*

Sentence 2: *Rental rates have continued to climb.*

These two related sentences can be joined with a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction. A comma alone, however, is NOT sufficient.

- *Alternative policies have informed recent decisions, **yet** rental rates have continued to climb.*

To separate elements of a sentence that add nonessential information about another component of the sentence

Interesting information about objects, persons, or places may sometimes be added to a sentence in a way that is not essential to the overall meaning of the sentence. Such information is set off from the remainder of the sentence with commas to mark it as an interesting, but nonessential, interruption to the main point. For example:

- *Laura Secord, **who is associated in Canada with chocolate**, played an important role in the War of 1812.*
- *Academic libraries, **sometimes considered the heart of universities**, are undergoing remarkable changes.*

If information about objects, persons, or places mentioned in a sentence is essential to the meaning of the sentence, this information must NOT be set off by commas. For example:

- *Computer programmers **who are highly experienced** deserve to be highly compensated.*
- *The policy was clearly designed to limit travel and interactions **which wasted department resources**.*

For more information about the use of commas, consult a writing guide. Several of these can be found at <http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/writing>. You may also wish to consult with a writing instructor in the Writing Centre or the Learning Commons.