

## Comma Usage

### Sentences

Sentences always contain two things: a *subject* and a *verb*.

- A verb is an action (like swimming, thinking, or needing).
- A subject is the person, place, or thing doing the action.

The following are all sentences. The subjects are in orange, and the verbs are in blue:

**I** went to the store. The **store was** big. **Everything** on the shelves **looked** delicious. **I** spent too much money.

### Fragments

Compare the sentences above to the following non-sentences, or fragments:

To the store. Was big. Everything on the shelves. Looked delicious.

None of these fragments could stand on their own. A person hearing them would be confused because they either do not know what is happening or who is doing it.

### Commas between Subjects and Verbs

Remember that you never put a comma between a subject and its verb.

The following is correct:

I went to the store. You already know that.

This is incorrect:

I, went to the store. You, already know that.

### Clauses

Independent clauses are basically sentences and can stand on their own. Dependent clauses also contain both subjects and verbs, but they must lean on an independent clause for support; they cannot be said or written by themselves without getting the confusion mentioned above.

Examples of independent clauses:

I went to the store

The store was big

I had bought everything

Examples of dependent clauses:

While I was outside

Although you might think it was small

By the time I was done

Notice how the independent clauses are whole ideas by themselves, while the dependent clauses only seem to be leading to something. This is why the second group cannot be alone.

## **Commas when Starting with a Dependent Clause**

If you start with a dependent clause, add a comma between it and the following independent clause. For example:

While I was out, I went to the store. By the time I was done, I had bought everything.

Most times, it's not necessary to use a comma when the dependent clause comes afterward. For example:

I went to the store while I was out. I had bought everything by the time I was done.

## **Fanboys and Connecting Independent Clauses**

F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. is an acronym that stands for "for," "and," "nor," "but," "or," "yet," and "so." These words are called conjunctions.

Use a comma when you connect two or more independent clauses with conjunctions, and make sure the comma comes immediately before the conjunctions. For example:

I went outside, and we walked to the store. I had bought everything, but we still wanted more.

You don't need a comma if you're using a conjunction to connect an independent clause to a dependent one. That means if one of the things you're connecting lacks a subject, you can skip the comma. Notice how the second subject (the "we"s) are not in the following example:

I went outside and walked to the store. I had bought everything but wanted more.

"Walked to the store" and "wanted more" are fragments, not sentences, so you don't need commas to connect them to an independent clause with a conjunction.

## **Comma Usage when Starting a Sentence with an Adverb**

An adverb just tells how a verb (an action) is done; for example: quickly, happily, finally. They usually end with -ly.

If you start a sentence with an adverb, use a comma after it. For example:

Quickly, I went to the store. Oftentimes, I would buy everything.

You do not need a comma if the adverb does not begin the sentence. For example:

I quickly went to the store. I would oftentimes buy everything.

## **Comma Usage when Addressing Someone or Something**

Use a comma to separate the person or thing you're talking to from the rest of the sentence. For example:

I went to the store, Mom. Dad, you should have come. Listen, little sister, you can come along next time.

This helps avoid confusion. Consider the following example:

Stop clubbing baby seals. Stop clubbing, baby seals.

The first sentence tells people to stop bludgeoning those cute animals. The second sentence means you are talking to those cute animals themselves and telling them to stop visiting nightclubs. It's funny, but it shows how powerful a comma can be.

## Commas and Lists

Use a comma to separate three or more items in a list. For example:

I bought milk, butter, and eggs. I also bought soap, toothpaste, shampoo, and conditioner.

The last comma is called an Oxford comma, and some people think it's unnecessary. But because it can create confusion in certain sentences, it is always safer to use it.

## Commas and Adjectives

Adjectives are words that describe. Some examples are "big," "beautiful," "rude," and so on. Use a comma between two or more adjectives that describe the same word. For example:

The big, blue store was where I shopped. The tall, long, metallic shelves were packed with items.

Notice that the words "big" and "blue" in the first sentence could be separated by the word "and," and the sentence still sounds fine.

The big and blue store was where I shopped.

That's how you know you need a comma.

But there are some adjectives you do **not** place a comma between. These are called non-coordinate adjectives. This is where an adjective is locked to the word after it. For example:

I ate the tasty chicken soup. I was outside, beneath the powerful summer sun.

You can double-check if you need a comma by placing "and" between the adjectives, and seeing how it looks. For example, you wouldn't say:

I ate the tasty and chicken soup. I was outside, beneath the powerful and summer sun.

## Commas and Quotes

Use a comma when quoting someone. This is useful to remember for essays. The comma separates the quote and the speaker. For example:

Abraham Lincoln said, "I cannot tell a lie."

"I cannot tell a lie," Abraham Lincoln said.

Notice the comma goes inside the quotation marks in the second example, but not the first. Also, the comma placement is the same, even when "said" is replaced by words like "stated" or "screamed."

## Commas and Yes/No

Use a comma when the first word in the sentence is a freestanding "yes" or "no." For example:

Yes, I did go to the store. No, I did not go to the gym.

Remember this is only when the “yes” and “no” can stand alone. You would not use a comma in the following example:

There were no muffins at the store.

## **Commas and Physical Addresses**

Use a comma to separate parts of a physical address. Also, add a comma to the end of a city-state combination. For example:

I live at 123 Fake Street, Houston, T.X. 77101.

Houston, Texas, is a great city to live in.

## **Commas and Dates**

Use a comma to separate part of a date. For example:

Monday, January 1, 2017, was good day.

January 2, 2017, was a bad day.

However, if you only mention the month and year, you do not need a comma. For example:

January 2017 was both good and bad.

## **Commas and Negotiation**

Negotiation is a kind of specification, usually when giving examples of what something is not.

For example:

I went to a store, not a bakery, to buy muffins.

I bought muffins, not cookies.

The same idea applies when a shift occurs in the sentence or thought-process. For example:

The muffins were good, well, as good as I could make.

The cloud looked like an animal, perhaps a baby seal.