

Comma Basics



Commas indicate a pause, which is something we all do while speaking. There are four moments when speakers often tend to pause.

MOMENT #1: WHEN GIVING A LIST

We generally use commas to divide up items in a list.

Example: *“Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash for hogs, corn for chickens, coal for oil lamps, lightbulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds.”* —Maya Angelou

MOMENT #2: AFTER AN INTRODUCTORY PHRASE

Commas are used to show the pause speakers tend to do after an introductory clause (a string of words at the beginning of a sentence that fit together but is not a complete sentence) that answers the following questions:

- 👉 When?
- 👉 Where?
- 👉 Why?
- 👉 How?
- 👉 To what degree?

Example: *“Before she had quite arisen, she called our names and issued orders.”* —Maya Angelou

MOMENT #3: WHEN YOU HAVE EXTRA INFORMATION

If you have extra information (in other words, those words that can be removed from a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence), you generally place commas around the extra information.

Example: *“[The town] closed in around us, as a real mother embraces a stranger’s child.”* —Maya Angelou

MOMENT #4: WHEN YOU CONNECT TWO SENTENCES WITH A CONJUNCTION

Commas are used to indicate the pause when you connect two possible sentences (or two complete thoughts) with a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*).

Example: *“I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little boils, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demand.”* —Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



Next-Level Comma Rules

If you feel that you understand the basic comma concepts (lists, extra information, introductory clauses, and connecting two sentences), the next step is to learn how to use commas stylistically. Here are three ways you can do that.

MOMENT #1: SEPARATING EQUAL ADJECTIVES

Use commas to separate two adjectives (describing words for nouns) that have the same weight. In doing this, please don't put a comma between the adjectives and the noun they are describing—only between the adjectives.

Example: *bumpy, winding road*—**not** *bumpy, winding, road*

A test you can use to see if adjectives have the same value is to ask whether they make sense if they are written in reverse order. If so, they are likely equal and need commas.

Example (needs a comma): *She was a happy, stubborn child.* = *She was a stubborn, happy child.*

Example (doesn't need a comma): *She often wore a gray wool shawl.*

MOMENT #2: DISTINCT PAUSE

Use a comma near the end of a sentence if there is a distinct pause or shift.

Example: *The chimpanzee seemed reflective, almost human.*

Example: *You're one of the senator's close friends, aren't you?*

Example: *The speaker seemed innocent, even gullible.*

MOMENT #3: PHRASE CLARIFICATION

Use commas to clarify a phrase (a set of words) at the end of the sentence that refers to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Only do this when the phrase can be placed there without causing confusion.

Example of this used well: *Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously.*

Example of this not used well: *Lisa waved at Nancy, laughing joyously.* (Who is laughing: Lisa or Nancy?)