

COMMAS

Commas show the rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow of a sentence.

Some say that using commas correctly cannot be learned by rule.

When wrongly inserted or omitted, they can cause chaos:

- No dogs please (Some dogs do actually *please* their owners)
- No dogs, please. (Dogs are not allowed here)
- What is this thing called, love? (You ask your partner what this object is called)
- What is this thing called love? (What is love?)
- He shot himself as a child (When he was a child, he shot himself)
- He shot, himself, as a child (When he was a child, he used to fire a gun)

Commas divide items in lists, but are not required before the and on the end:

The comma is correct if it can be replaced by and or or:

- The flavours on offer include orange and lemon and chocolate and after-eight.
- The flavours on offer include orange, lemon, chocolate and after-eight.
- The Union Jack is red, white and blue. (Standard UK English)
- The Union Jack is red, white, and blue. (The Oxford comma - UK English)
- The Union Jack is red, white, and blue. (Standard American English)

Some argue the extra comma prevents confusion, as when there are other ands/& in the vicinity.

Compare:

- I went to the chemist, Marks & Spencer, and Lloyds Bank.
- I went to the chemist, supermarket and Lloyds Bank.

In a list of adjectives, the rule is to use a comma where an and would be appropriate:

- It was a dark, stormy night. (The night was dark and stormy)
- He was a short bearded man. (A man with a short beard)
- He was a short, bearded man. (A short man with a beard)

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Except here:

- It was an endangered white rhino. (The adjectives are not intended as a list: The white rhino is endangered.)
- It was an endangered (and) white rhino. (The rhino is endangered *and* this one was white).
- Austrian red wines are the best (Red wines from Austria)
- Austrian and red wines are the best (Austrian wines and red wines in general are the best)

Commas for joining two complete sentences (A sentence contains a **verb**, whereas a phrase doesn't), using such conjunctions as *and, or, but, while* and *yet*:

- Stuart **wanted** to stay up until midnight. He **grew** tired and fell asleep.
- Stuart **wanted** to stay up until midnight, *but* he **grew** tired and fell asleep.

Words that must not be used to join two sentences together with a comma are *however* and *nevertheless*:

- It was Daniel's birthday on Saturday. *Nevertheless*, he didn't receive any presents.
- He wasn't hungry. *However*, Robert started the day with bacon and eggs.
- Robert started the day with bacon and eggs; *however*, he wasn't hungry. (Note: a semicolon is used, not a comma!)

Commas filling gaps (missing words implied by commas):

- David has dark hair; Peter, fair. (Peter has fair hair)

Commas before direct speech:

- The Queen said, "Doesn't anyone know it is Alexandra's birthday today?"

Commas before interjections:

- *Wow*, what would we do without Tom?
- *Stop*, or I'll fire!

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Commas in pairs:

Used to mark both ends of a ‘*weak interruption*’ to a sentence, which can be removed:

- I am, *of course*, very happy for you.

Be careful! Consider the following:

- The people in the queue, who managed to get tickets, were very satisfied. (Everyone in the queue managed to get tickets)
- The people in the queue who managed to get tickets were very satisfied. (Not everyone in the queue managed to get tickets – only the satisfied ones).
- Dieter opened the window, *and* after waiting for a minute he closed it again. (This is OK, but is not elegant. The comma is used as a “joining” comma, before the “*and*”).
- Dieter opened the window *and*, after waiting for a minute, he closed it again. (Accepted norm).
- Dieter opened the window, *and*, after waiting for a minute, he closed it again. (Correct, but is overkill).

Extracts from: **Eats, shoots & leaves**, Lynne Truss, 2003. Profile books Ltd.