

# Commas

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Commas are notoriously difficult to use correctly. Although the usage of commas varies depending on the discipline, this handout will present a few basic rules that apply in most situations.

## Coordinating Conjunctions

A coordinating conjunction is a word that links words, phrases, or clauses together. These **coordinating conjunctions** are: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so**. (The mnemonic devices **FANBOYS** can help you remember these.) Here are some examples of how coordinating conjunctions (i.e., FANBOYS) work:

**Words:** Everyone needs to feel *wanted* **and** *appreciated*.

**Phrases:** Mom either left her keys *in the bedroom* **or** *in the kitchen*.

**Clauses:** *The puppies have been playing in mud*, **so** *they need a bath*.

Always use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that connects two **independent clauses** (e.g. “The puppies have been playing in mud” and “they need a bath”). An independent clause is a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence: it has a subject, a verb, and is a complete thought.

**Example:** The man was wearing a striped suit, **but** he wasn’t wearing a matching tie.

If either of the two clauses is a **dependent clause**, which means it lacks a subject and/or verb and/or complete thought, a comma before the coordinating conjunction is not needed.

**Example:** The man was wearing a striped suit **but** wasn’t wearing a matching tie.

To check your work, read the clauses on either side of the coordinating conjunction separately. If both could stand alone as complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses), put a comma before the conjunction. If not, don’t.

## Comma Splices

If there isn’t a coordinating conjunction between the two independent clauses, using a comma alone causes a **comma splice**, which is a type of **run-on sentence**. Both comma splices and run-on sentences are considered errors in traditional written academic English and should be avoided or corrected.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today, it was fancy.

To correct a comma splice, you have a few options:

- Add a coordinating conjunction (i.e., FANBOYS) after the comma.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today, *and* it was fancy.

- Change the comma to a semicolon.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today; it was fancy.

- Make each clause a separate sentence.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today. It was fancy.

- Add a subordinator (*because, until, if*, etc.), if appropriate.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today *because* it was fancy.

## Conjunctive Adverbs

**Conjunctive adverbs**—words like **however**, **therefore**, or **moreover**—separate two independent clauses just like coordinating conjunctions, but they require different punctuation.

If there is an independent clause on both sides of the conjunctive adverbs, you can either use a period to make two separate sentences, or you can use a semicolon after the first complete thought. Either way, there should be a comma after the conjunctive adverb and before the second complete thought.

**Correct:** Soccer is my favorite sport. **However**, I really excel at basketball.

**Correct:** Soccer is my favorite sport; **however**, I really excel at basketball.

**Incorrect:** Soccer is my favorite sport, however I really excel at basketball.

**Incorrect:** Soccer is my favorite sport, however, I really excel at basketball.

## Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

An **introductory word, phrase, or clause** comes before the main clause and provides context for the main clause. A **phrase** is a group of related words within a sentence or clause that lacks a complete thought and/or subject with a related verb. Introductory clauses are dependent clauses, meaning they cannot stand alone as sentences because they are missing a subject, verb, and/or complete thought. Using a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause is largely dependent on the audience or discipline, assignment, and author's preferences. However, it is best to use a comma after an introductory element if there is any chance the sentence could be misread or considered confusing.

**Incorrect (word):** Generally fighting tigers is a bad idea.

**Correct (word):** **Generally**, fighting tigers is a bad idea.

**Incorrect (phrase):** At the library I found several useful books.

**Correct (phrase):** **At the library**, I found several useful books.

**Incorrect (clause):** Although we went to the store on Tuesday we went to the store today.

**Correct (clause):** **Although we went to the store on Tuesday**, we went to the store today.

## Lists

Commas are used to separate three or more items in a list or series. The final comma (i.e., the Oxford or serial comma), placed before the conjunction (e.g., *and* or *or*) and last item is strongly recommended to help with clarity. **However, depending on your discipline, audience, and assignment, you may omit this final comma.** For example, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, often used in academics and publishing, strongly encourages the use of the Oxford or serial comma, but *The Associated Press Stylebook*, used for journalistic writing, recommends writers omit the Oxford or serial comma, unless there are issues of clarity.

**Example (Chicago Style):** You can buy candy, soda, and peanuts at the amusement park.

**Example (AP Style):** You can buy candy, soda and peanuts at the amusement park.

However, if the items in the list are longer or more complicated, you should always use a comma before the conjunction to avoid ambiguity.

**Example:** A good friend listens without judging, offers help when it's needed, and always brings out the best in those around them.