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Finding and Fixing Comma Errors

What's a Comma Error? A comma error occurs when a comma is needed but is not present, or when a comma is used but is not grammatically necessary. Many people tend to use commas like salt: they sprinkle them in randomly to add flavor to their writing. Others have learned to place a comma wherever they might pause or take a breath, but this technique is unreliable. There are actually just six main rules for using commas, and learning these six rules will help you know how and when to use commas.

Rule 1: Items in a Series

Use commas to separate three or more items in a series of nouns, verbs, adjectives, or phrases.

Missing Comma Error: My favorite summer vegetables are tomatoes beans and asparagus.
Correction: My favorite summer vegetables are tomatoes, beans, and asparagus.

Missing Comma Error: I can watch television text my friends and eat dinner all at the same time.

Correction: I can watch television, text my friends, and eat dinner all at the same time.

Missing Comma Error: I am going to college so I can become informed thoughtful and skilled.

Correction: I am going to college so I can become informed, thoughtful, and skilled.

TIPBOX: If you have only two items in a series, no comma is needed:

Error: Britney, and Tiffany were born in the eighties.

Correction Britney and Tiffany were born in the eighties. (*Comma is NOT needed because there are only two items in this series*).

Rule 2: Directly Addressing a Person

If you are addressing a person directly, use a comma to separate the name of the person being addressed from the content of the message.

Missing Comma Error: Trang you did very well on the writing exercise.

Correction: Trang, you did very well on the writing exercise.

Missing Comma Error: Did you get some help at the Learning Support Center Tom?

Correction: Did you get some help at the Learning Support Center, Tom?

Error: Did you know Ahmad you can practice speaking English in the Conversations Partner program?

Correction: Did you know, Ahmad, you can practice speaking English in the Conversations Partner program?

TIPBOX: If you are describing a person doing something or if the person named is not being talked to or addressed directly, then a comma is NOT needed between the subject and verb:

Comma Error: Lucia, prefers to post her photos on Facebook instead of MySpace.
Correction: Lucia prefers to post her photos on Facebook instead of MySpace.

{A comma is NOT needed in this example because Lucia is not being addressed directly: this describes what she likes to do. It is incorrect to place a comma between a subject and verb that are next to each other.}

Rule 3: Independent Clauses Joined by a Coordinating Conjunction

Always place a comma before the coordinating conjunction when joining two independent clauses. Coordinating conjunctions are also known by the acronym FANBOYS.

FANBOYS = for / and / nor / but / or / yet / so

Error: I live close to Cascadia **but** I prefer attending Edmonds Community College.

Correction: I live close to Cascadia, **but** I prefer attending Edmonds Community College.

Error: My speech today should have lasted 20 minutes **yet** it only lasted 5 minutes.

Correction: My speech today should have lasted 20 minutes, **yet** it only lasted 5 minutes.

TIPBOX: *When a single subject is followed by a compound verb (two actions), a comma is unnecessary because you are not combining two independent clauses.*

Comma Error: *Muhammad attends law school at the University of Washington, and works part-time at a printing store.*

Correction: *Muhammad attends law school at the University of Washington and works part-time at a printing store.*

4. Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

If you are beginning a sentence with an *introductory word, phrase, or clause*, use a comma after the word or phrase (make sure the rest of the sentence could stand alone as a complete thought).

Error: By the end of the season EdCC's team will have won ten games in a row!

Correction: *By the end of the season,* EdCC's team will have won ten games in a row!

Error: To satisfy the Quantitative Skills requirement students can take a variety of courses.

Correction: *To satisfy the Quantitative Skills requirement,* students can take a variety of courses.

Error: To do well on the GED test you will have to devote time to studying.

Correction: *To do well on the GED test,* you will have to devote time to studying.

TIPBOX: *If you the subject of the sentence is placed at the end of a sentence, then no comma is necessary.*

Correct: To do well on the exam is my **goal** (*goal* is the subject of the sentence).

Correct: Near the end of most textbooks is an **index** (*index* is the subject of the sentence).

You should use a comma before an afterthought that is attached to the end of the sentence.

Correct: The days are getting a bit longer now, aren't they?

Correct: Our dog is getting really fat, isn't he?

Rule 5. Use a Comma to Set Off Transitional Terms and Nonessential Information
If you are including a transitional word, phrase, or clause that gives additional information or that interrupts the flow of the sentence, use a comma before and/or after it: this is sometimes referred to as *enclosure* because non-essential information is enclosed in commas.

Error: I will unfortunately not be able to attend graduation this year.

Correction: I will, unfortunately, not be able to attend graduation this year.

Error: International Students **who come from all over the world** often live close to the college.
{*This sentence could refer to all International Students, or just to those who come from all over*}

Correction: International students, **who come from all over the world**, often live close to the college. {*Now the sentence clearly refers to all international students*}.

TIPBOX: These words can act as non-essential interrupters OR as coordinators between 2 Independent Clauses:

To add information	To illustrate ideas	To show contrast	To show cause/effect
again	for example	however	accordingly
in addition	for instance	instead	consequently
besides/also	in fact	nevertheless	subsequently
furthermore	namely	nonetheless	therefore
likewise		otherwise	thus
moreover		still	

When a word like, *however, therefore, and furthermore* comes between two independent clauses, you should use a semicolon before it:

Ind. Clause + {semicolon + Transitional Term + Comma} + Ind. Clause

Correct: {The flight was late arriving} ; **however**, {I was still able to make the other flight.}

Correct: {The GED test has 5 sections} ; **furthermore**, {the writing test has 2 parts.}

Rule 6. Use a Comma to Set Off Quotations

If you are quoting someone's words directly, use a comma to separate their words from the attribution phrase (such as *said Nadia* or *he remarked*).

Error: "These new shoes are hurting me" complained Natalya.

Correction: "These new shoes are hurting me," complained Natalya.

Error: Paco told his parents "I've just signed up for a Yoga course at EdCC!"

Correction: Paco told his parents, "I've just signed up for a Yoga course at EdCC!"

Error: "Pennies" said Andre "are not really worth using anymore."

Correction: "Pennies," said Andre, "are not really worth using anymore."

Sentence Practice: Please underline and correct any comma errors in these sentences:

1. I am taking English 101 Philosophy 120 and Math 90 this quarter.
2. Marwa would you like to join our Chemistry study group tonight?
3. Marwa would like to join our Chemistry study group tonight.
4. Parking your car on campus can be difficult so it is better to take the bus.
5. Jae shouted "Hooray! I found a parking spot!"
6. The Learning Support Center offers help with English Foreign Language science accounting math business and even psychology classes.
7. I like the food on campus but I also to get pho' across the street sometimes.
8. If you have a disability you should register with EdCC's Services for Students with Disabilities Center in Mountlake Terrace Hall to access support and accommodations.
9. The first day of the quarter is always exciting but many new students also feel a little anxious.
10. I learned a lot in my History of Jazz class last quarter so this term I am taking Art History.

For more practice and to test your knowledge, go to:

- Capital Community College Guide to Grammar and Writing
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/commas.htm>
- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/01/>