

THE COMMA

Let's eat Grandma. Let's eat, Grandma. Commas save lives!

Commas create brief pauses in sentences, but their use can be confusing. Published writers often break traditional rules. The following rules show the **standard uses of commas**. It is best to follow these guidelines in academic essay-writing.

1. **Use a comma to separate THREE OR MORE items in a list (not two):**
 - My courses include **history, economics, humanities, and psychology**.
 - We **arrived home, took off our coats, and prepared dinner**.
2. **Use a comma with a conjunction (FOR, AND, NOR, BUT, OR, YET, or SO) to join two complete sentences (a complete sentence has at least a subject and a verb): :**
 - My course is very challenging, **but** I feel confident that I will pass.
 - Dr. Shahin is a good lecturer, **and** it is clear that she knows her subject.
3. **Use a comma after a transitional word, a short phrase, or a dependent clause when it is AT THE BEGINNING of a sentence:**
 - **Therefore**, it was a good experience. (after a transitional word)
(however, similarly, thus, consequently, nevertheless, on the contrary, finally, etc.)
 - **In the short story**, the main character wins the lottery. (after a short phrase)
(according to the author, in the end, after some time, after leaving, as already mentioned, etc.)
 - **Although her ideas are persuasive**, her examples are flawed. (after a dependent clause)
(after..., before..., when..., if..., as long as..., until..., because..., etc.)
4. **Use a comma(s) to set off phrases that give non-essential information in a sentence at the beginning, middle, or at the end of it:**
 - **A long and tedious drive**, the trip to Toronto takes five hours. (beginning: requires one comma)
 - The Canadian public, **however**, remains divided on the issue. (middle: requires two commas)
 - This novella, **published in 1930**, is historical fiction. (middle: requires two commas)
 - The character, **who grew up in Canada**, turns his life around. (middle: requires two commas)
 - Halifax is in Nova Scotia, one of Canada's Maritime provinces. (end: requires one comma)

Here, the 'who information' is **essential** to the meaning; so, it is **NOT** set off by commas:

- **People who live in Vancouver** expect a lot of rain in the winter.

5. **Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives, which act in a similar, equal way to describe something:**

- The speaker presented an **interesting, entertaining** lecture.

No commas are used here because the adjectives are not acting in similar, equal ways:

- We saw a **bright red** bird.

For more help, contact the Academic Skills Centre.