WRITING CENTER
Academic Enrichment & Support Center

Comma Usage

1. Use commas before a conjunction when joining two or more independent clauses.

An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence, but you must use a comma if you decide to connect independent clauses with the following conjunctions: and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so.

I had a paper due today, so I did not get very much sleep last night.

2. Use commas after introductory elements.

a) When an introductory clause is prefaced by words such as after, although, as, because, if, since, when, or while, a comma will be needed after the introductory clause.

Because I was very tired, I slept through my alarm.

b) Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, and prepositional phrases four words or more.

Having discovered my blunder, I hurriedly got dressed.
To receive full credit, I had to turn my paper in at the beginning of class time.

c) A comma should immediately follow common introductory words such as yes, however, and well.

However, I did not mind that I was disheveled because my paper was complete.

3. Use commas to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

To test whether or not a phrase is essential, leave it out and see if the sentence still makes sense. If the phrase is not essential, place a comma directly before and after the phrase to create the appropriate pauses.

My classmate, grinning widely, proceeded to inform me that our paper's due date had been postponed until the next class period.

4. Use commas to separate a series consisting of three or more elements.

I asked my brother to pick up eggs, milk, and bread at the grocery store.

5. Use commas between coordinate adjectives, but do not include an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun.

Coordinate adjectives have equal weight describing the noun; you can test if two adjectives are coordinate by switching their order or adding and or but in between. If the sentence still makes sense, the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated with a comma.

My roommate is an easygoing, shy person.

6. Use a comma to set off a phrase that indicates a contrast or a distinct shift.

Puppies are very cute, but messy.

7. Use commas for typographical reasons: to set off all geographical names, dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776.
"Galloping Gertie" bridged the Tacoma Narrows in Tacoma, Washington.

8. Use a comma to separate a quotation from the rest of the sentence that explains or introduces it.

Oscar Wilde once remarked, "I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out."

9. Finally, use commas wherever necessary to avoid confusion.

If I cook, Grandma will do the dishes.