

# Understanding Commas

Commas are one of the most useful, overused, and confusing punctuation marks. Though comma rules can be complicated, their purpose is to make sentences clearer and more effective. Good comma usage leads to successful writing. Knowing when, where, and how to use commas shows that you are a capable and convincing writer.

## What is a comma?

A comma is a punctuation mark that is used to separate various sections in a sentence. A comma adds clarity to complex sentences and tells readers how to read them.

## Where to use commas

### When combining independent clauses

A clause is a group of words that has a subject and verb in it. An independent clause makes sense on its own, but a dependent clause doesn't. An independent clause can be a sentence.

#### Examples:

Dependent clause: *Although bananas are delicious and nutritional...*

Independent clause: *Banana peels left carelessly on the ground can cause people to slip*

Though a comma can connect independent clauses, it's not strong enough to do so on its own, so you must also use a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet). The conjunction comes after the comma. If you don't want to use a coordinating conjunction, you must use a stronger punctuation mark like a period or semicolon.

#### Example:

*Monkeys like bananas, **and** humans like them too.*

Combining independent clauses with a comma but without a coordinating conjunction is an error called a comma splice. In the example sentence below, the coordinating conjunction has been taken out, leaving the comma without enough support.

#### Example:

*Monkeys like bananas, humans like them too.*

### With words, phrases, or clauses that interrupt a sentence to modify it

Sentences often contain words, phrases, or clauses that modify the basic sentence. If these words are essential to understanding the sentence, no commas are used. If they are not essential, then commas are put before and after.

#### Examples:

*Bananas, **which are my favorite fruit**, are delicious and nutritional.*

*The store **where my brother works** sells bananas.*

To decide if a clause or phrase is essential, try reading the sentence without it. If the sentence is still clear, the information is not essential, and commas are needed. Clauses and phrases that start with *that* will always be essential and will not need commas.

#### Example:

*The bananas **that my brother bought** are overripe.*

Some words signal a relationship or transition between sentences or paragraphs. These words must be set off by commas. If they come at the beginning of a sentence, put one comma after them. If they come at the end, put one comma before them. If they are placed in the middle, put commas before and after them.

**Examples:**

***However**, even I get tired of bananas sometimes.*

*Even I get tired of bananas sometimes, **however**.*

*Even I, **however**, get tired of bananas sometimes.*

When the transition word is at the beginning of the sentence, it can be tempting to use it like a conjunction to combine two sentences. Since transition words aren't conjunctions, this results in a comma splice.

**Examples:**

Incorrect: *I like bananas, **however**, even I get tired of them sometimes.*

Correct: *I like bananas. **However**, even I get tired of them sometimes.*

## When you have an introductory phrase or clause

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, a phrase, or an introductory word, a comma is placed at the end before the rest of the sentence. This helps the reader to separate the introductory part from the main sentence.

**Examples:**

***Although bananas are delicious and nutritional**, banana peels left carelessly on the ground can cause people to slip.*

***Certainly**, there are other fruits I like, but bananas are the best.*

***At the end of the day**, give me bananas, and I'll be happy.*

***Oh**, I'd like a banana milkshake right now.*

Sometimes an introductory phrase can be short, but sometimes, it can be so long that it might seem like a whole sentence. Don't forget the comma—it will help a reader know where to pause and what information to pay attention to.

**Example:**

***After the summer where I fell off my bike and broke my ankle and had to stay indoors all day reading Curious George to my little sister**, I've developed a love for bananas.*

## When writing a list

Commas separate items in a list. *And/or* must be placed before the last item. If the comma in the list can be replaced with *and/or* then it is correct.

**Example:**

*Bananas are **a delicious snack, a great breakfast, and a nice dessert**.*

When you have two or more adjectives that are equal and modify the same noun, they are called coordinate adjectives, and commas are placed in between them. To check if adjectives are coordinate, see if they can be reversed and separated by *and* while still making sense. If they do make sense, use commas. If they don't, don't use commas.

**Examples:**

*Tasty, delectable, and scrumptious bananas are my favorite breakfast.  
Today, I ate **two yellow** bananas.*

The Oxford comma is the last comma used in a list, the one that comes right before the *and/or*. MLA, APA, and many academic manuals require this comma, but it is not always necessary in other cases (for example, in a newspaper article that must save on space). If you decide not to use that last comma, make sure the sentence is still understandable.

*I found some bananas, Mary and Tracy. I found some bananas, Mary, and Tracy.* The difference here is between a weird person who names their bananas and someone who found some bananas and two people too.

### **When common sense says you should**

Commas are meant to make sentences easier to understand. They show a reader where to pause and what information goes together. If you think a comma makes the sentence clearer, add one. If a comma is getting in the way of understanding, take it out. With very short sentences, a comma may—occasionally—be optional. In the sentences below, the comma is optional because the sentence is clear and understandable with or without it.

**Examples:**

*Soon, I will make banana bread.*

*Soon I will make banana bread.*

## **Conclusion**

Commas can be confusing! However, their purpose is to make sentences clear and easy to follow. Good commas help with flow and separate information so readers can process it. Bad commas distract readers and get in the way. For precise, professional writing, do your best to follow the rules, but also rely on your common sense. You are the writer—the commas work for you.

## **References Consulted**

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