

7. COMMAS

What could you do to the following sentence to make it clearer?

Betty bring me a cup plate and bowl.

Now compare what you did with the following version of the sentence:

Betty, bring me a cup, plate, and bowl.

Inserting three commas into the above sentence makes the meaning of the sentence much clearer. You can tell that somebody is speaking to Betty and asking her to bring three separate items rather than a “cup plate” and a “bowl.”

Definition

The **comma** is the most frequently used form of punctuation, and it helps you to make sense out of a sentence. In other words, commas—as you’ve already seen above—make it easier to read and understand sentences. Commas are used either alone or in pairs. When used alone, they set off or *separate* items. (I’ll see you later, Ralph.) When used in pairs, they *enclose* items. (On Tuesday, October 4, I won a million dollars.)

SERIES

Use commas to separate a series of three or more items:

1. Jack put mustard, ketchup, and relish on his hot dog.
2. Mrs. Beazley walked, ran, and skipped to the store.
3. Brook saw lions, tigers, bears, and wizards in the woods.

Although leaving out the comma before the word *and* is also considered to be correct, this practice can sometimes lead to confusion:

June read books about soldiers, sailors, cops and robbers.

It is not clear from this sentence whether June read books about three or four subjects. Since you can *always* avoid this kind of confusion when you use the comma before the word *and* in a series, we recommend that you use it.

BETWEEN ADJECTIVES

Commas that are used to separate adjectives take the place of the word *and*. If you can insert the word *and* between two adjectives, use a comma. If you can't insert the word *and*, do not use a comma:

1. the small, graceful dancer (The *small and graceful dancer* makes sense.)
2. the bright young man (The *bright and young man* does not make sense.)
3. the heavy, clumsy dog (The *heavy and clumsy dog* makes sense.)
4. the enthusiastic senior class (The *enthusiastic and senior class* does not make sense.)

HINT

When you can insert *and* between two adjectives and it makes sense, there is usually a natural pause between the two words. It is sometimes useful to read the phrase out loud to yourself to see if you can hear this pause. If you hear a pause, insert a comma.

INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Use commas after words like *oh*, *well*, *yes*, and *no* when they come at the beginning of a sentence:

1. Oh, why can't you be quiet?
2. Yes, I see your point.
3. Well, of course I know Sally's mother.

DIRECT ADDRESS

Use commas to set off or enclose words that are used to address or speak to a person:

1. Mom, please give me a dollar.
2. Come here, Roxanne, and look at this frog.
3. I can't find your horse, Slim.

MISUNDERSTANDING

Sometimes it is necessary to use commas to prevent misunderstanding or misreading:

To Emily William was a fool.

This sentence isn't about a girl named Emily William, as you might first think. If you add a comma after *Emily*, you'll see the sentence reveals

Emily's opinion of William. Sentences 1 and 2 would also be confusing without commas:

1. After seeing his uncle, Bill bought a paper.
2. Above, the jet roared through the sky.

When you try reading these sentences without commas, you'll see that it is possible to misread them.

DATES, ADDRESSES, AND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Use commas to separate items in dates, addresses, and geographical names:

1. Tuesday, June 29, 1901
2. 6 Duck Street, Grinnell, Iowa
3. Paris, France

LETTERS

Use commas after the salutation of a friendly or informal letter (as opposed to a business letter) and after the closing of any letter:

Dear Aunt May, Yours truly,
Dear Dad, Sincerely,

There are a number of other situations in which it is necessary to use commas. You will learn about these situations as you study new concepts later in these books.

COMMA EXERCISES

A. *Directions:* Insert commas where they are needed in the following sentences.

EXAMPLE: By the way, Shirley, how's your parakeet?

1. Gabriela wanted bacon lettuce and tomato on her sandwiches.
2. No I do not want to go to the lecture on dinosaurs.
3. Is that you Makiba?
4. When she saw her aunt Martha began to laugh.
5. The spy gave Herman a cold murderous look.
6. Does Mr. Kaplinsky live in Kansas City Kansas or Kansas City Missouri?
7. John Kennedy was assassinated on November 22 1963.
8. Above the eagle flew gracefully through the air.
9. The bright young man sat down ordered his breakfast and ate it.

10. Oh why won't you ever listen to me Thelma?
11. To Betty Henry looked like a clown.
12. Robert loved to read books by Gogol Turgenev Tolstoy and Chekhov.
13. His smooth graceful walk revealed that he was a dancer.
14. Ever since Sam has been scared of angry muskrats.
15. Yes Rosie I intend to visit Rome Italy.

B. *Directions:* Insert commas where they are needed in the following sentences. If a sentence is correct, write the letter C in the space at the end.

EXAMPLE: Please bring me a drink, Tim. C

1. Well I don't see why they moved to Houston, Texas.
2. Nigel's favorite colors were black gray, and white.
3. Roy, could you help me mow the lawn on Friday June 10?
4. The cool, green water lapped around Matilda's feet.
5. Yes, I think I will go swimming on Mondays Wednesdays and Saturdays.
6. Now will you roll the dice and move, Billy?
7. Leroy lived at 6 Oakhurst Drive Springfield, Ohio.
8. Running, reading, and fishing were Anne's favorite activities.
9. No, Elvida you can't put marshmallows in the soup.
10. According to his uncle Harry was a mean, unfriendly boy.

C. *Directions:* In the following sentences, circle the commas that are not necessary and insert commas where they are needed.

EXAMPLE: Jane~~o~~ lived in an old,shabby house.

1. Penelope collects butterflies coins, bumper stickers, and, stamps.
2. The athletic, senior girls live in Spokane Washington.
3. Next to her, cousin Jake June saw an enormous turtle.
4. Well Phillip, I guess, reading writing and math are not your strong points.
5. Woody Guthrie, grew up in Okemah Oklahoma.
6. Donald saw a group of large, hungry, crocodiles slip into the river.
7. He arrived, in Flatfoot North Dakota on May 12, 1972.
8. No I don't believe a word, you are saying Alice.
9. Gum drops chocolate and boiled, sweets are all examples of candy.
10. When, did you become a lawyer Arturo?

D. *Directions:* Make up sentences that illustrate each of the following situations.

EXAMPLE: commas in dates *I was born on August 4, 1923.*

1. commas in series _____

2. commas between adjectives _____

3. commas to prevent misunderstandings _____

4. commas after opening words _____

5. commas in direct address _____

6. commas in addresses _____
