

You may have been taught to insert a comma "wherever you would breathe" when reading your sentences out loud. That's not such a bad rule of thumb: you should follow it, even if you follow nothing else. However, there are more precise guidelines that can be useful to know. This handout covers six of the basic rules for comma use. These are not the only rules, but they cover many of the situations in which writers use commas.

## 1 USE COMMAS TO OFFSET INTRODUCTORY WORDS OR PHRASES FROM THE SUBJECT OF A SENTENCE

**Oftentimes, writers do not begin their sentences with the subject (the actor or the "doer"). For example, the previous sentence begins with the modifier "oftentimes," just as this sentence begins with the phrase "for example." Writers use commas to distinguish the subject of the sentence from any introductory material.**

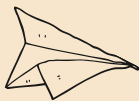
Though he suspected it would be closed, Tommy drove to the store.

Using a combination of publicly disclosed documents and off-the-record sources, the journalist documented a pattern of financial mismanagement.



## 2 USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE THREE OR MORE ITEMS ON A LIST

**This rule applies regardless of whether the items are single words or phrases.**



Tommy went to the store and bought apples, oranges, grapefruit, pears, and milk.

To make her morning runs easier, Tammy listens to music, wears comfortable shoes, and takes a scenic path by the lake.

## 3 USE COMMAS TO SEPARATE TWO OR MORE COORDINATE ADJECTIVES THAT ALL MODIFY THE SAME NOUN

**"Coordinate" refers to adjectives that have equal weight when modifying a noun. If you can insert "and" between the adjectives, then you need a comma.**

Tammy is a funny, kind woman, and Tommy is a compassionate, curious man.

**However**

They live in a quirky, beautiful apartment building.\*\*

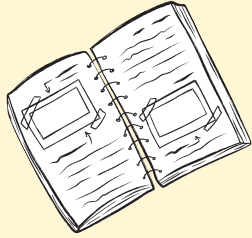
\*\* "apartment and building" does not make sense, so don't put a comma between these two words. "Apartment building" is a complete phrase that denotes a kind of building.



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## USE COMMAS WITH A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION TO LINK INDEPENDENT CLAUSES

An independent clause is a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence. A coordinating conjunction allows you to link two independent clauses with a comma. You can remember coordinating conjunctions with the acronym FAN BOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).



Tommy went to the store, and his wife Tammy went for a run.

Tammy is young, but she is also wise.

**However**

Tammy is young but wise.\*\*

\*\*No comma needed here, because the lack of a subject after the coordinating conjunction implies that the subject remains the same (Tammy is young, but she is also wise).

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## USE COMMAS TO OFFSET NONESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A SENTENCE

Nonessential words or phrases add depth and detail to a sentence, but they do not fundamentally alter the meaning of the sentence. Nonessential words or phrases provide a way, though not the only way, for writers to throw in extra information. See that previous sentence? The phrase “though not the only way” was offset by commas because it is something of an aside. Whenever you include a nonessential word or phrase, you should offset it by commas. Place commas on both ends if you insert the word/phrase in the middle of the sentence. Place a comma only at the beginning if you end your sentence with a nonessential word or phrase.

Tammy, who teaches preschool, is on her feet all day.

On Friday nights, after an exhausting week at work, she will run on the treadmill.

Tommy, by contrast, leads a very sedentary life.

**However**



The two of them are something of an odd couple, to be honest.

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## USE COMMAS TO OFFSET CITY NAMES FROM STATE OR COUNTRY NAMES, YEARS FROM MONTHS AND DAYS, AND TITLES IN NAMES

USC is located in Los Angeles, California.

USC was founded on October 6, 1880.

Gregory House, M.D., has a talent for making difficult diagnoses.



Rules and examples adapted from Purdue OWL, "Extended Rules for Using Commas"