

Proofreading Skills Tutorial

Tutorial 11: **Using Commas**

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (11a_Using_Commas_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (11b_Using_Commas_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:
csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Commas used to separate a series of words, phrases, or clauses

Commas used before a coordinator when joining two sentences

Commas are used **before** a coordinator (or coordinating conjunction) when joining two sentences. In the examples below, the comma separates two complete sentences:

Karim likes cats, **but** Shireen likes dogs.

His car broke down, **so** he bought a new one.

A useful method to remember coordinators is that the first letter of each one together spells **FANBOYS**:

F or
A nd
N or
B ut
O r
Y et
S o

The most common coordinators are ***and***, ***but***, and ***so***.

Principle II. Use a comma **before** a coordinator when joining two complete sentences.

Sometimes writers omit the commas between sentences that are closely related or short and are in no danger of being misread:

Chocolate is delicious but it has caffeine.

Jack fell down and he broke his crown.

Note: It will always be correct to use a comma when joining very short sentences with a coordinator. Please refer to Tutorial 15: *Joining Ideas (Coordination and Subordination)* for more information about how to use coordinators or FANBOYS.

Please open your 11b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.

Commas used to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses

The comma is also used to set off **introductory words, phrases, or clauses**.

words: **Incidentally,** the Warriors were defeated in the playoffs.

Generally, the weather in San Mateo is temperate and sunny.

phrases: *verbal phrase*
After realizing that she ran through a red light, Julia decided to slow down.

noun phrase appositive or NPA
A controversial poet and social critic, Allen Ginsberg wrote "Howl."

noun phrase appositive or NPA
a poem about self expression.

prepositional phrase
In Houston, \$225,000 will buy a house with a home theater, den, and pool.

Note: Common introductory phrases are reviewed in Tutorial 17: *Verbal Phrases*, Tutorial 16: *Noun Phrase Appositives*; prepositional phrases are covered in the Introductory Tutorial: *Identifying Verbs and Subjects*.

clauses: *subordinate clause*
Even though Violeta failed English 848, she learned so much about how to write an effective essay.

subordinate clause
While real estate in much of the country languishes, property in San Francisco continues to escalate in price.

Principle III. Use a comma to set off introductory words, phrases, or clauses.

Note: The most common introductory clauses begin with a subordinator (or subordinating conjunction). Please see Tutorial 15: *Joining Ideas (Coordination & Subordination)* for more information.

Please open your 11b exercises file and complete Exercise 2 and 3.

Commas used to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses

Commas are used to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses when the word or group of words interrupts the main idea. These nonessential elements that are set off with commas can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning.

Examples:

words: The Warriors, **unfortunately**, were defeated in the playoffs.

The students will, **however**, protest the increase in tuition.

noun phrase appositive or NPA

phrases: Lake Tahoe, **a popular vacation destination for people from the Bay Area**, offers visitors a variety of water sports.

verbal phrase

Jonny, **pretending that he is in the circus**, jumps up and down on the bed and shrieks with excitement.

phrase

My student Nora, **for example**, has registered for English 850, so she can get additional help with her essay.

Note: The phrase describing Lake Tahoe, “**a popular vacation destination for people from the Bay Area**,” is a noun phrase appositive, and it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Please refer to Tutorial 16: *Noun Phrase Appositives* for more information. The phrase describing Jonny, “**pretending that he is in the circus**,” is a verbal phrase. Please refer to Tutorial 17: *Verbal Phrases* for more information.

adjective clause

clauses: Her cousin, **who attends the University of Oregon**, is coming to the Bay Area next week.

Note: The clause “**who attends the University of Oregon**” is an adjective clause, and it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Adjective clauses modify nouns and begin with words like *who*, *whom*, *which*, *that*, and *whose*. Since in this sentence, the adjective clause helps to describe the noun “her cousin,” commas should set it off. Adjective clauses give writers options for combining sentences by allowing them to include extra information about nouns in their paragraphs without writing whole new sentences. Please refer to Tutorial 19: *Adjective Clauses* for more information.

Principle IV. Use a comma to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses when the word or group of words interrupts the main idea.

Please open your 11b exercises file and complete Exercise 4.

Commas used to separate items in dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers

Commas are used to set off items that use dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers.

Examples:

in dates: Julia was born on **January 12, 1989**, in San Francisco, California.

April 21, 1984, was a momentous day in Jay's life when she had her first child.

Note: When using only the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the year:

The average temperatures in **August 2007** are the highest on record for that month.

in places: **Oakland, California**, is an important maritime point of entry for trade in the United States.

Giancarlo's family moved to **Florence, Italy**, where his father bought a restaurant.

Note: Commas set off a state or country when a city or town name is also used:

in addresses: The President of the United States resides at 1600 **Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.**

Note: The comma is used in numbers of one thousand or larger:

in numbers: **12,473**

2,519,146

2,001 *Space Odyssey*

Principle V. Use commas to separate items in dates, geographical places, addresses, and numbers.

Please open your 11b exercises file and complete Exercise 5.

Proofreading for Commas

Try the following strategies to proofread for commas:

1. If you tend to put in too many commas, check and underline each one to see if you can justify it with a principle.
2. As you read your work aloud, add a comma when there is a pause between ideas.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and be prepared to incorporate the correct use of commas in your own writing.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.