

Punctuating with commas

The comma (,) is used to indicate a short pause in a sentence. This pause helps to make the meaning clear to the reader. There are many rules for using commas. Most academic writing tasks use the following rules for using commas:

1. Use commas after sentence **introducers**
2. Use commas with sentence **coordinators**
3. Use commas for sentence **inserters or interrupters**
4. Use commas as a **linkers** in lists



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will NOT help you much with your **commas**. Sometimes, you will see a green line to warn you to check for **missing commas**. This is a useful signal but may be incorrect or it may miss them altogether. You will need to proofread your work yourself and apply the rules for using commas correctly in your writing.

1. Use commas after sentence introducers

If a sentence starts with an adverb or transition word, phrase or clause, you will need a comma to separate it from the main clause.

Examples

- ✓ (adverb) **Recently**, the smoking laws changed to prohibit adults from smoking in the presence of children in vehicles.
- ✓ (transition word) **Consequently**, most adult smokers changed their behaviour when travelling with children.
- ✓ (phrase) **Until 2008**, society criticised the habit of smoking in vehicles with child passengers instead of legislating against the practice.
- ✓ (dependent clause) **Unless there is government legislation to protect the health of children**, some adults are not prepared to sacrifice their smoking habits for the welfare of their underage passengers.

2. Use commas with sentence coordinators

• Rule 1: the comma rule

If you are joining independent clauses to write compound sentences, use a **comma** BEFORE 'and', 'but', 'for', 'or', 'nor', 'so', 'yet'.

Example

- ✓ Petrol prices are rising daily, **and** many people are struggling to meet costs in their daily lives. Price increases may stimulate a search for a cheaper alternative, **but** this does not always happen.

• Rule 2: the semicolon and comma rule

If you are joining independent clauses to write compound sentences, use a **semicolon** BEFORE and a **comma** AFTER connecting conjunctions like 'also', 'however', 'instead', 'meanwhile', 'moreover', 'namely', 'now', 'otherwise', 'similarly', 'still', 'then', 'therefore', 'thus'.

Example

- ✓ The government made desperate attempts to control petrol prices; **meanwhile**, families and businesses suffered economic hardship.

3. Use commas for sentence inserters or interrupters

When you insert a non-restrictive (*non-essential information*) word, phrase or relative clause into the MIDDLE of sentences, use a **pair of commas** to separate the information.

Examples

- ✓ (word) The highest mountain, **Kosciuszko**, was covered in snow during the winter months. It was, **however**, a sea of wild flowers and native plants in summer. The great mountain climber, **Jack Peterson**, visited the area in all seasons.
- ✓ (phrase) The climbers, **mostly from Victoria**, faced the harshest conditions on their trek across the mountain peak.
- ✓ (clause) The alpine rangers, **who were really quite fearless**, rescued many lost mountaineers. The conditions, **which were often hazardous**, did not daunt them.

EXCEPTION

You DO NOT use a pair of commas if the information in the inserter is ESSENTIAL to the meaning of the sentence (RESTRICTIVE ELEMENT).

Example

(restrictive clause) The mountain climbers **who were lost in the snow storm** were found the next day huddled in a makeshift snow shelter. (No commas required because the inserter *who were lost in the snow storm* is essential to the meaning of the sentence.)

4. Use commas as linkers in lists

When you are listing items in a series, use a comma to link each item. Do NOT use a comma for the last two items joined by 'and' unless longer list items are confusing. Also, if you add information to the end of a sentence, use a comma to link the added information to the rest of the sentence.

Examples

- ✓ (items in a series) **Plastics, glass bottles, paper and tins** were listed for the recycling of waste program in the local community. (NOTE: no comma between items joined by 'and')
- ✓ (items in an extended series) The project was supported by **the local residents, district clubs and community groups, and the neighbourhood schools**. (NOTE: a comma is used before 'and' if the meaning is not clear in longer list items)
- ✓ (item added to the end of a sentence) The local council set up a recycling program as part of its environmental rejuvenation project, **which could work well if community members cooperate**.



DO NOT use UNNECESSARY COMMAS

- ✗ **DO NOT** put a comma between the subject and its verb (e.g. Government policies about conservation in Australian **states**, (X no comma) **vary** considerably).
- ✗ **DO NOT** use a comma before *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet* if you use the word 'that' (e.g. Many Australian politicians realise that some State conservation laws are **ineffectual**, (X no comma) **and that** these laws would be more potent if they were moved to a Commonwealth jurisdiction).
- ✗ **DO NOT** use commas to attach dependent adverbial clauses to the end of an independent clause. (e.g. Conservation laws were passed back to the **Commonwealth**, (X no comma) **because** State laws were inconsistent.)