

Punctuation:

Using commas (,)

The comma is the most used punctuation mark within sentences. However, many people don't use commas when they're needed, put them in the wrong place or overuse them. The thing to remember about a comma is that it represents a **separation of meaning** in a sentence by telling the reader when to pause.

Misuse or lack of a comma can change, or confuse, the meaning of a sentence.

Eg Let's eat, Harry.

or

Let's eat Harry.

It's ambiguous and confusing without correct punctuation. Consider the difference in meaning between the following two sentences:

The actress sued her neighbour, an archbishop and a truly moral man.

or

The actress sued her neighbour, an archbishop, and a truly moral man.

When to use a comma

Use a comma in the following cases:

- **when making side comments**

Use commas to enclose a side comment, that is, additional but not essential information, about the subject. Such information would otherwise interrupt the basic idea of the sentence. See the examples below.

Eg Sean, *the loudest student in the tute group*, gave the most interesting presentation.

The sergeant, *who is an experienced officer in the field*, was able to calm the offender.

Marianne, *an aerobics instructor*, works out every day.

In each case, the sentence still makes sense even when the side comment is removed. If the additional information is crucial to the meaning of the sentence, commas are not required.

Eg. All police officers who speed unnecessarily will be reprimanded.

- **after an introductory element**

Introductory elements often require a comma and "set the stage" for the main part of the sentence

Eg. *If they want to win*, athletes must exercise every day.

Eg. *Because he kept barking insistently*, we threw the ball for Smokey

Eg. *To stay in shape for competition*, athletes must exercise every day.

- **after introductory words**

Introductory words such as: *however*, *still*, *furthermore*, and *meanwhile* create continuity from one sentence to the next.

Eg. The coaches reviewed the game strategy. *Meanwhile*, the athletes trained on the Nautilus equipment.

Eg. Most of the evidence seemed convincing. *Still*, the credibility of some witnesses was in question.

- **to avoid confusion**

Does a reader have to read the sentence more than once to make sense of it? Remember 'Harry' at the beginning of this flyer.

- **when writing lists**

Commas are used to separate items in a list

Eg I ordered bacon, eggs and toast for breakfast.

Notice that we replace the comma with 'and' between the last two items. This is to let the reader know that the end of the list is coming up. Look at this example:

Eg. The officer wore a jacket, hat and appointments to the parade.

The same rule works for a list of describing words [adjectives]

Eg. The suspect was 150cm tall, blue-eyed, blonde and male.

If you cannot replace the comma with 'and', the comma isn't needed.

Eg. A tall (and) colourful (and) banner was hung behind the reception area.

A tall, colourful banner was hung behind the reception area.

- **when using a direct quote**

Eg. Smith (2004, p.6) said, 'I love grammar'.

- **when using dates and numbers**

Eg. 22 November, 2003
3,000 100,000
In 2009, 12 seminars were organised.

- **in addresses and place names**

Eg. The suspect was seen in Bathurst, NSW, on July 25, 2008.

This information has been adapted from
Jakob, K. (1991). *A guide to police writing*. Canada: Carswell.

and the following site: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_commain.html

Visit the Learning Skills companion website
English Support @CSU
<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/ess>