

What is a Comma?

A comma is a punctuation mark (,) that we use to divide sentences into different clauses (parts). These clauses can be long or short. Commas help to guide the reader by instructing them how to read the sentence. Commas are sometimes used to create dramatic effect in a sentence. However, using commas as pauses and breathing devices may confuse your reader, i.e. commas are used to direct your reader grammatically and syntactically; they show your reader **how** to read the text.

When to Use a Comma

1. Between items in a list, e.g.

- ✓ The student successfully completed the research, the report, and the bibliography.
- ✓ We must assess the results, the significance of the results, and the ways in which the results may be applied to other contexts.

***Note:** an item in a list may be a one-word noun (as in the first example above), or it may be an entire phrase (as in the second example above).

2. After introductory phrases, e.g.

- ✓ However, many scholars agree that universities require more funding.
- ✓ Additionally, the proposal reveals several significant oversights in the methodology.
- ✓ Moreover, poverty levels have been slowly declining in recent decades.
- ✓ As this study makes clear, student attendance in university is an urgent problem.
- ✓ ***Note:** introductory phrases may vary in length from one word to several words, as demonstrated in the sentences above. They provide a brief “aside” from the main focus of the sentence.

3. Before and after parenthetical clauses, e.g.

- ✓ Churchill, who was the Prime Minister between 1951 and 1955, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953.
- ✓ The drug, which is used to treat anxiety disorders, is a potent anxiolytic of the benzodiazepine class.
- ✓ ***Note:** a parenthetical clause is one that gives further information about the subject of the sentence. It momentarily “interrupts” the sentence, but if we were to remove the information that is between the commas, the sentence should still read correctly. In the sentences above, Churchill and The drug are the respective subjects of each sentence, and they are each followed by a parenthetical clause that provides additional information between two commas.

When to Use a Comma

4. Before FANBOYS, e.g.

- ✓ ***Note:** FANBOYS are conjunctions that connect two clauses of a sentence, i.e. For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.
- ✓ The speaker at the conference made an unconvincing claim, **for** which there is no theoretical support.
- ✓ Evidence-based practices lead to the best policies in hospital settings, **and** such policies mean that ER nurses are well prepared for the challenges presented by work on the ward.
- ✓ Students should not use informal language in their writing, **nor** should they use unsupported personal opinions.
- ✓ Research indicates that artificial intelligence (AI) will dramatically enhance the modern quality of life for humans, **but** it also suggests that AI has the potential to be harmful.
- ✓ There is ongoing scholarly debate and public discourse about whether gender identity is grounded in biology, **or** whether it is socially constructed.
- ✓ The survey stated that the same piece of music was played in each test case, **yet** the listeners responded in very different ways.
- ✓ Socrates did not write about his philosophies, **so** what we understand about his teachings comes largely from his pupils, such as Plato and Xenophon.

5. Before and after subordinating conjunctions (and phrases), e.g.

- ✓ Other writers of the time, however, are remembered for their popularity.
- ✓ Many studies, for example, wrongly insist that the end of the nineteenth century was a largely secular time.
- ✓ It may be argued that, if we are to accept the central findings of this research, the matter may become much more problematic.

***Note:** A subordinating conjunction connects one clause of a sentence to another. These are similar to introductory phrases (point 2 on this list), except they come in the middle of a sentence. These are transition words (and sometimes phrases) between clauses, which provide a brief “aside” from the main focus of the sentence. They are often/also called **conjunctive adverbs**.

The Oxford Comma

The Oxford comma is the comma that comes before the word “and” in a list of three or more items, or in a sentence with multiple clauses. It is not a requirement in writing, but it can offer additional guidance for readers. However, if you choose to use the Oxford comma, it is important that it is used consistently.

Here are two examples of the Oxford comma:

- 1. They used an appropriate methodology, conducted the experiment, and recorded their results.** In this sentence, the Oxford comma is used after the second item in the list and before the “and” of the final item in the list. In this example, it helps to separate the different items, and it also helps to clarify each clause of the sentence. However, if this list only had two items, we would not use the Oxford comma, e.g. **They used an appropriate methodology and conducted the experiment.**
- 2. The students were very effective researchers, and their theories about Marxism and Victorian culture were proven correct.** In this sentence, the word “and” needed to be used twice to differentiate between the subjects in each clause of the sentence. The Oxford comma here provides clarity, i.e. its use after the first clause of the sentence separates the students (subject 1 in clause 1) from their theories (subject 2 in clause 2). The absence of a comma in the second clause of the sentence groups the students’ theories together (Marxism and Victorian culture) as two items in a short list, i.e. remember that they are both part of the sentence’s 2nd subject (theories).

Comma Quiz

Put the commas in the correct positions in each of these sentences. You can find the correct answers on the next page (page 4) of this document.

1. The basic tenet of semiotics the theory of sign and sign-usage is antirealist.
2. Although art history as a whole is affected by the wake of the ‘linguistic turn’ the authentication of ouvres in the cases of Rembrandt Van Gogh and Hals has been a particularly positivistic pursuit.

- Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. “Semiotics and Art History”. *The Art Bulletin* 73:2 (June 1991): 174-208.

Comma Quiz: Answers

Below you will see all the commas in the correct positions. Were you correct?

1. The basic tenet of semiotics, the theory of sign and sign-usage, is antirealist.
2. Although art history, as a whole, is affected by the wake of the 'linguistic turn', the authentication of ouvres, in the cases of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Hals, has been a particularly positivistic pursuit.

- Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics and Art History". *The Art Bulletin* 73:2 (June 1991): 174-208.

Explanation of Sentence 1 Commas:

- ✓ The phrase "the theory of sign and sign-usage" is a parenthetical clause that provides additional information about the subject of the sentence, which is the "tenet of semiotics". See point 3 of How to Use a Comma.
- ✓ The phrase momentarily interrupts the sentence, but it would still read perfectly without this parenthetical clause, e.g. The basic tenet of semiotics is antirealist.

Explanation of Sentence 2 Commas:

- ✓ The phrase "as a whole" is a parenthetical clause, so it needs a comma before and after it. See point 3 of How to Use a Comma.
- ✓ The same is true of the longer phrase "Although art history...is affected by the wake of the 'linguistic turn'". Additionally, in this case, "Although" is a subordinating conjunction, so it needs a comma at the end of the clause. See points 3 and 5 of How to Use a Comma.
- ✓ The names of "Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Hals" are items on a list, so commas are used to separate these items. Note that the Oxford comma is used here before the "and" of the final item on the list.
- ✓ There is a comma before and after the phrase "in the cases of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Hals", which is a parenthetical clause. This is another "aside", i.e. an additional piece of information. As before, the phrase momentarily interrupts the sentence, but it would still read perfectly without this parenthetical clause, e.g. the authentication of ouvres has been a particularly positivistic pursuit. See point 3 of How to Use a Comma.