

# Comma Usage

**Commas ( , )**  
Commas primarily have three functions in a sentence:

- > To separate words in a list
- > To set off words, phrases or clauses from the rest of the sentence
- > To combine into one sentence two independent clauses with the help a coordinating conjunction (and, but etc.)

**Some basic rules:**  
Never separate the subject and verb with a comma in a simple sentence structure:

**incorrect:** Pope Benedict XVI, will visit Miami next month.

**correct:** Pope Benedict XVI will visit Miami next month.

Prepositional phrases are seldom set off by commas:

**incorrect:** John Valdez, of San Diego, placed second in the race.

**correct:** John Valdez of San Diego placed second in the race.

**Commas in lists**  
**Use commas separate items in a list.**

The qualities of a good reporter are inquisitiveness, skepticism and the ability to write well.

The American flag's colors are red, white and blue.

My favorite ethnic foods are Italian, Mexican, Thai and French.

Use a comma before the conjunction when a conjunction is part of the list or when the items in the list are lengthy.

I had coffee, lox and bagel, orange juice, and fruit for breakfast.

Good reporters need to know how to think on their feet and ask the right questions, how to be skeptical of sources without turning into a cynic, and how to write clear and precise prose.

**Use commas between equal adjectives.**

He wore a cheap, torn suit.  
He wore a torn, cheap suit.  
He wore a cheap and torn suit.

Carlson writes in a thoughtful, precise manner.  
Carlson writes in a precise, thoughtful manner.  
Carlson writes in a thoughtful and precise manner.

**Do not use a comma if adjectives nearer the noun outrank other adjectives.**

The rain ruined her new spring bonnet.  
I use an old metal milk can as an umbrella stand.

**Setting off part of the sentence**

Use a comma before the conjunction when the conjunction separates two independent clauses.

She was glad she had looked, for a man was following her.

Rep. Scoop Jackson is touring defense plants in California, and he also plans to visit Disneyland.

Rep. Scoop Jackson is touring defense plants in California, but he will not visit the Rockwell plant in El Segundo.

Do not use a comma before the conjunction if both verbs in the sentence share the same subject.

Rep. Scoop Jackson is touring defense plants in California and also plans to visit Disneyland.

Rep. Scoop Jackson is touring defense plants in California but will not visit the Rockwell plant in El Segundo.

Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase only if the comma will improve the meaning of the sentence.

While the congressman said he supported a strong national defense, he said he would oppose increasing funding for "Stars Wars" research.

When he had tired of the mad pace of New York, he moved back to Laguna Beach.

The comma not needed for a short introductory phrase.  
During the night a dog barked.  
After dinner we went for a walk.

Use commas before participial phrases (phrases that begin with verb ending in ing)  
The heavy rains covered much of the area, causing several traffic accidents and knocking out electricity in some neighborhoods.

**Use commas to set off nonessential words, phrases and clauses.**  
Police said Bishop, 24, will be arraigned Tuesday.  
Bishop, who police said was driving 90 mph when he hit the bicyclist, was not hurt in the collision.

**Does it make a difference?**

Which libels women?  
Thirteen people knew the secret, all told.  
Thirteen people knew the secret; all told.

Which convict has a hollow leg?  
The escaping convict dropped a bullet in his leg.  
The escaping convict dropped, a bullet in his leg.

What are our plans for Lynn?

We need to eat, Lynn.

We need to eat Lynn.

Lynn Truss's classic  
book on punctuation

