

Commas, Commas, Everywhere!

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Introduction

Commas can be quite tricky to master. Grammarly defines a comma like this:

"While a period ends a sentence, a comma indicates a smaller break. Some writers think of a comma as a soft pause—a punctuation mark that separates words, clauses, or ideas within a sentence."

Some transcribers may mistakenly use that soft pause in speaking to determine where to place commas. Keep in mind, however, that conversational language is much different than written language. People do not always pause at the most logical places.

There are some hard and fast rules to use when determining where to place commas whereas others are evolving and changing with the times. We are not here to debate the validity, or lack thereof, of these changes. This document will only cover TranscribeMe's preferences.

Subjects and Verbs and Objects... Oh My!

A Verb and its Subject

Although people sometimes pause to gather their thoughts, there should **not** be a comma separating the subject(s) and the verb(s) of a sentence.

- No → Nancy, is the fastest transcriber ever.
- Yes → Nancy is the fastest transcriber ever.

Two Subjects

Don't separate two subjects with a comma.

- No → Nancy, and her team, exceeded their goal this month.
- Yes → Nancy and her team exceeded their goal this month.

Two Objects

- No → My favorite desserts are chocolate cake, and snickerdoodles.
- Yes → My favorite desserts are chocolate cake and snickerdoodles.

Two Verbs

- No → Tim volunteers, and donates every year to the Salvation Army.
- Yes → Tim volunteers and donates every year to the Salvation Army.

The more complex a sentence is the more confusing comma placement can become.

- No → John loves to go to the theater, but hates opera.
- Yes → John loves to go to the theater but hates opera.

Loves and *hates* are both the verbs (actions) of *John*, the singular subject.

The Comma Splice - Relationship Trouble

Watch out for those pesky comma splices! A comma splice is when two independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) are joined with a comma without the help of a conjunction.

But can't we use a semicolon instead? Yes, you can; however, there are rules. Namely, the two independent clauses should be closely related. How can you tell if they are closely related? By using a semicolon, you are giving both clauses (sentences) equal position or rank of importance. For example,

I like to transcribe; I love to QA files.

Or:

I like to transcribe. I love to QA files.

But not:

I like to transcribe, I love to QA files.

I love to transcribe; I want to be a QA someday.

Or:

I love to transcribe. I want to be a QA someday.

But not:

I love to transcribe, I want to be a QA someday.

Note: If there is a conjunction separating the two sentences, a comma would be appropriate.

I like to transcribe, and I love to QA files.

I love to transcribe, but I want to be a QA someday.

These are not the only rules for using semicolons - at TranscribeMe, we prefer to use semicolons sparingly - but we are talking today about comma splices and how to avoid them. The moral of the story is that if there is no conjunction, a period or a semicolon is needed.

Coordinating Conjunctions - FANBOYS

A coordinating conjunction is a word used to connect clauses or sentences that have a relationship. A comma is used to separate the independent clauses (or complete sentences) joined together by a conjunction. To help remember what these conjunctions are, we give you the **FANBOYS**:

F = for

A = and

N = nor

B = but

O = or

Y = yet

S = so

Grammar-Quizzes.com gives a great example:

Fans love to watch Anna, **for** she dances beautifully. She performs with a fan, **and** people enjoy watching her. She hasn't taken dance lessons, **nor** does she need to. Her technique is unconventional, **but** the effect is striking. She can fill an audience with joy, **or** she can bring people to tears. Other dancers try to imitate her style, **yet** they have not succeeded. She is talented, **so** she will attract fans for many years to come.

Comma Before So

Should there always be a comma before the word *so*? No. It really depends on where and how it is used in the sentence. In the middle of a sentence? Hmm... that depends. If it is used as a coordinating conjunction (i.e., before an *independent* clause), yes. If it is used before a *dependent* clause (i.e., a phrase that *cannot* be a complete sentence by itself), no. Do not use a comma in such instances.

- Karen always grabbed the high-priority files, **so** she was added to the special priority team.
- I grab the high-priority files so I can get the higher pay rate.

So how can I tell the difference?

If you can replace the word *so* with **therefore**, it is a coordinating conjunction and should have a comma. If you can replace the word *so* with **so that**, it is a *subordinating* conjunction and there should **not** be a comma. Check out our article on [Subordinate Clauses](#) for examples and explanations.

Okay. So what about at the end of the sentence? At TranscribeMe, when a speaker ends a sentence with a "dangling conjunction", we use a comma before it, **so**. Check out the [Dangling Conjunction](#) section of [Conjunction Junction](#) for more examples.

Commas Between Lists of Items

Please no:

- My three favorite things are eating my family and not using commas
- Jane loves cooking her family and her dog

Much better:

- My three favorite things are eating, my family, and not using commas.
- Jane loves cooking, her family, and her dog.

Save a life. Use commas between lists of items.

The Oxford Comma (a.k.a. the Serial Comma)

When you have a list of three or more elements, use commas to separate them. The Oxford comma (also known as the *serial comma*) is the comma before the conjunction and the final element in the series.

- Halloween and Thanksgiving are my favorite holidays because they are in the fall.
 - There are only two elements, so no comma is needed. (*Just like with two subjects*).
- Easter, Halloween, **and** Christmas are my favorite holidays because of all the candy.
 - Here we have three elements, so we use commas to separate them from each other (but don't put a comma *after* the last item because we do not want to separate the subjects from the verb, *are*).
- Kelly likes to run and swim.
 - Only two elements here, so there is no comma needed.
- Kelly entered a triathlon where she will be running, swimming, and bicycling.
 - Three elements, so we use commas to separate them from each other.

Note that if the list items are separated by a conjunction, we do **not** use commas (*except for unusual circumstances where a comma would aid clarity*).

- I do not like carrots or corn or peas.
- I love ice cream and cake and cookies and candy.

Multiple Adjectives

But what about multiple adjectives? If the adjectives modify the noun to an *equal* degree, separate them with commas. If they do not modify the noun to an equal degree, do not use a comma. To determine whether the adjectives are modifying the noun equally, try switching the order of the adjectives. If it still sounds natural, they are equal and require a comma.

- She was expecting a harsh verbal warning for her terrible mistake.
 - She was expecting a verbal harsh warning for her terrible mistake. ← No, that doesn't sound right, so no comma needed. She was expecting a harsh verbal warning for her terrible mistake.
- Thomas was excited about the fun, new project.
 - Thomas was excited about the new, fun project. ← Yep. They can be switched, so a comma would be correct. Thomas was excited about the fun, new project.

The Comma Clause

The usage of commas around clauses seem to be the stickiest situations for many.

Nonrestrictive Clauses

Commas with parenthetical elements (also known as nonessential or nonrestrictive) are a type of adjective clause that provides additional information. They can easily be removed, and the remaining sentence would still make sense. These nonessential clauses can also be referred to as interrupters as they, in effect, interrupt the flow of another phrase or the sentence.

- Commas, *for example*, are problematic for many writers.
 - Commas are problematic for many writers. → Removed, and the sentence still makes sense.
- The size of some yachts, *although a bit pretentious*, can be quite impressive.
 - The size of some yachts can be quite impressive. → Removed, and the sentence still makes sense.

Restrictive Clauses

Commas with restrictive clauses, as opposed to nonrestrictive, add necessary information for the understanding of the phrase or word it is modifying. They are often introduced by *that* or *who* and should never be offset by commas.

- The style guide that she was referring to was updated yesterday.
 - The style guide was updated yesterday. → Removed, and although the sentence still makes sense, it is lacking detail that would help the reader understand exactly which style guide was updated.

- The man who lives next door has gone on a three-month holiday.
 - The man has gone on a three-month holiday. → Removed, and although this is still a complete sentence, you can easily see that it is lacking the necessary detail to help the reader understand which man went on holiday.

Direct Addresses and Appositives

Direct Address

Speaking of the man who lives next door, let's talk about direct addresses and appositives. An appositive is a word or phrase that provides additional information that helps to distinguish it in some way. Direct address is when you speak to someone specifically:

- You, Susan, may find this to be interesting.
- I would not have been able to complete the project without your help, Tom.
- Captain, I need you to help me for a moment. (*Note that when you call someone by their title only, in effect, it replaces their name.*)

Also note: if you were to remove the names (*Susan, Tom, and Captain*), the sentences still make sense; however, it provides distinguishing information about to whom "you" is referring.

Nonessential Appositives

Nonessential appositives provide additional information that can be removed easily:

- My next-door neighbor, Bob, has gone on a three-month holiday.
- My bedroom, the largest in the house, is the coldest room in the Winter and warmest room in the summer.

Note: An appositive's placement within the sentence does not matter. If the appositive begins the sentence, it is followed by a comma. If it is in the middle of the sentence, a pair of offsetting commas are required. If it ends the sentence, it is preceded by a comma. (See the Direct Address examples for all three scenarios).

Essential Appositives

Essential appositives provide additional, necessary information and should not be offset with commas. Some great examples of these are when dealing with multiple possible elements.

- Edgar Allan Poe's poem The Raven is my favorite narrative poem.
- Edgar Allan Poe's poem is my favorite narrative poem. → Removed, and although this is still a complete sentence, you can easily see that it is lacking the necessary detail to help the reader understand which one.
- My friend Lisa tells the funniest anecdotes.
- My friend tells the funniest anecdotes. → Removed, and although this is still a complete sentence, you can easily see that it is lacking the necessary detail to help the reader understand which one, and it is obvious, from context, that it is not a direct address.

Comma Before Because?

The comma before *because* conundrum: Do I put one before *because*? Yes and no... *Because* is a subordinating

conjunction. A what? A subordinating conjunction. Again, you can read more about them in [Subordinate Clauses](#).

Although it is a subordinating conjunction, *because* introduces a "clause of purpose" answering the understood question of, "Why?" Generally, **there should be no comma to separate the two.**

- No → Every year, Sarah goes to Florida for vacation, because she loves the beach.
- Yes → Every year, Sarah goes to Florida for vacation because she loves the beach.

- No → Liz decorated the baby's room in blue, because she thought she was having a boy.
- Yes → Liz decorated the baby's room in blue because she thought she was having a boy.

Clause Switcheroo

If the sentence starts with the *because* clause, said clause is followed by a comma.

- *Because she loves the beach*, Sarah goes to Florida for vacation every year.
- *Because she thought she was having a boy*, Liz decorated the baby's room in blue.

Exception to the Rule

There can be a comma before *because* when it is clarifying a statement that can be interpreted differently without the comma. I like this example used in Quick and Dirty Tips website:

- I heard Marylou got fired because Bob was gossiping in my dad's store.

Did Marylou get fired because Bob was gossiping? Or did I hear about it because Bob was gossiping? Hmm... well, I'd like to think it was because I heard about it because of Bob; however, the sentence can be interpreted either way, so a comma adds clarity.

- I heard Marylou got fired, because Bob was gossiping in my dad's store.

Still having trouble seeing how it makes a difference? Let's change the order of the phrases around.

- Because Bob was gossiping in my dad's store, I heard Marylou got fired.

As Well As and Such As

In short, both of these phrases follow the same rules as restrictive and nonrestrictive phrases. If they are restrictive (necessary), we do not use commas.

- The phone numbers and email addresses are provided to the team. ← Restrictive
- The phone numbers, as well as email addresses, are provided to the team. ← Nonrestrictive
- Herbivores such as moose and elk do still pose a risk to humans. ← Restrictive
- Members of the deer family, such as moose and elk, do still pose a risk to humans. ← Nonrestrictive

Interjections

Okay, so what do we do when words and phrases are added to the beginning of sentences? What if the speaker tacks something to the end? It's all a bit confusing, right?

Words or Phrases Added to the Beginning

Introductory Clauses

Introductory clauses are dependent phrases that set the stage for the main action of the sentence. They can include prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, participial phrases, infinitive phrases, and absolute phrases. A comma is needed after the introductory phrase.

- To do well, one must practice.
- Shining brightly, the stars seemed magical.
- After the adjustment, your pay will be substantially higher.

Sometimes, it can be just a singular word. These usually create continuity from the previous statement.

- The staff was getting more and more upset. Meanwhile, the manager was trying to think of ways to resolve the issues.
- Then, the staff decided to be proactive and get screenshots of the technical glitches that were plaguing them.
- Finally, the manager decided to call tech support.

Interjections! Ouch! Wow!

In the case of the sentence in the teaser (introductory statement in this section) above, the word "okay" is used as an interjection and should be offset by a comma. That said, it would also be grammatically correct to use a period or other appropriate punctuation (although we do try to avoid using exclamation points in transcription).

Okay, so what do we do when words and phrases are added to the beginning of sentences?

Or:

Okay. So what do we do when words and phrases are added to the beginning of sentences?

Hi, how are you?

Or:

Hi. How are you?

Words Added to the Middle or End

Does *Too* Need a Comma Too?

When the word *too* is used to mean *also*, *additionally*, *besides*, etc. and is used as an interrupter (see [Nonrestrictive Clauses](#)), it is offset with commas.

- I, too, would like to go see that movie.
- Sarah felt like she, too, was lost in the fray.

When added to the end of the sentence, well, it is debatable and a matter of preference. The Chicago Manual of

Style states that one is only needed to note an abrupt shift in thought (meaning as in interrupter and not at the end).

- I like scary movies, but I like romantic ones too.

If I said that (the example above ^^) while discussing different genres of movies, no comma is necessary. However, if I wanted to add emphasis, a comma could be added. It's a judgment call.

Speaker 1: I like romantic movies.

Speaker 2: I like romantic movies, too.

In this example, emphasis is added to show equality between the speakers and that Speaker 1 is not the only one that likes romantic movies.

No comma is needed when it is used to mean excessively, to a higher degree, very, etc.

- Is there such a thing as too much chocolate?
- Jim speaks way too fast.

Questioning Tone?

Often speakers will add a question (a word or short phrase) to the end of a sentence to seek understanding or agreement. It would be grammatically correct to either precede the question with a comma or separate it from the preceding sentence.

I'd like to leave in about an hour, okay?

Or:

I'd like to leave in about an hour. Okay?

But not:

I'd like to leave in about an hour okay?

Yes → You didn't get the tickets, did you?

No → You didn't get the tickets did you?