OU Writing Center
The University of Oklahoma

Grammar Guides:
8 Comma Rules to Remember

This guide identifies some of the basic comma rules[1] people often forget or apply incorrectly. Keeping these in mind can help you write with greater clarity and accuracy.

Rule 1

Commas are needed **when combining two independent[2] clauses (complete sentences) with a coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

Example: "I wanted to wear flip ***flops, but*** it was too cold today."

Rule 2

When you begin a sentence with a **dependent clause,** set it apart from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

Example: "***On Saturdays,*** we wear Crimson and Cream."

Rule 3

Use a comma after a **conjunctive adverb** that follows a semicolon and connects two independent clauses. (therefore, nonetheless, additionally, alternatively, consequently, henceforth. For more conjunctive adverbs, see our Parts of Speech handout.)

Example: "I wanted to wear flip flops; ***however,*** it was too cold today."

Rule 4

Use commas to separate items in a **list of three or more things**. This is called a *serial* or *Oxford Comma*.

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[1] You'll see the essential portion of each rule in **blue text that is bolded.**
The example that demonstrates that rule in action is ***red, bolded, and italicized.***

[2] For more details on independent and dependent clauses, see our guide "Types of Clauses and How to Use Them."

Example: “Anything is possible with ***coffee, willpower, and wifi.***”

Rule 5

Use a comma to **separate an adjective that describes a noun when “and” could take the place** of the comma.

Example: “The Sooners’ offense set an ***aggressive, fast*** tempo from tipoff.”

Rule 6

Use commas to **set off extra information in a sentence that isn’t essential** to the sentence’s meaning.

Example: “My sister***, Maria,*** loves parakeets.”

Rule 7

Use commas **when including direct quotations**.

Example: “Tania ***said, ‘I*** have too much to read and not enough caffeine.’”

Rule 8

Do **NOT use a comma to separate the essential elements** of a sentence.

Example:
Correct - “Whoever left their laundry in the ***washer needs*** to get it out now.”
Incorrect – “Whoever left their laundry in the washer, needs to get it out now.”

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