WHERE COMMAS COMMONLY GO

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part i

A comma means a pause, right? So wherever you’d pause when saying a sentence, put a comma there—right? No! The “stick-it-where-you-pause” principle is the main cause of mis­punc­tuation in student writing. It’s totally subjective: it scatters commas where, ac­cord­ing to the rules, they don’t belong.

The rules themselves are fairly simple—although, before you can apply them, you have to be able to analyze your sentences, and that’s not so simple. But most of what you need to know to analyze sentences is covered in this part I; part II will ex­plain the comma rules themselves. But don’t skip to Part II without the information in Part I, or you’ll be lost.

**Finding the Clauses** (**They’re *Not* at the North Pole**)

Crucial to analyzing sentences is knowing the difference between a phrase and a clause. A clause is a group of words that contains both a subject and a verb; a phrase is a group of words that lacks one or the other or both. Here’s a phrase: “to the store.” Here’s a clause: “She went to the store” (*she* is the subject, *went* is the verb).

To analyze a sentence, **first find the verbs**. These either tell what’s being done, or they are linking and helping verbs, usually forms of “to be” (“am,” “are, “is,” “was,” “were,” “be,” “being,” etc.) or of “to have” (“have,” “has,” “had,” etc.). In the sentence, “After he left the house, he found a ball on the way to the store,” the verbs are *left* and *found*. True, he was also going to the store, and that’s an action; but the sentence doesn’t refer to *going*. There’s no verb in “on the way to the store”; it’s merely two prepositional phrases.

Once you’ve found all the verbs, **next find their subjects**. You find these by asking, “Who or what verbed?” where “verbed” is each verb in turn. For the above sentence, ask, “Who or what *left*?” Answer: *he*. “Who or what *found*?” Answer: *he* again (the second *he*).

The number of subject-verb combinations tells you how many clauses are in the sentence. In our example, there are two subject-verb combos, *he left* and *he found*; so there are two clauses.

Next, **find direct objects and indirect objects**, the other major elements in clauses. All clauses have a verb and a subject (at least an understood subject, like “You” in “Shut the door!”). But many clauses lack direct objects, and most lack indirect objects. A direct object is what receives an action (has the action done to it), and an in­dir­ect object is what receives a direct object. Find a direct object by asking, “Subject verbed who or what?” Find an indirect object by asking, “Subject verbed the object to who or what?” In “He threw me the ball,” you first find verbs by asking, “What actions are going on (and what helping verbs are there)?” Answer: *threw*. You then find the sub­ject by asking, “Who or what threw?” Answer: *He*. Then you look for a direct object: “The boy threw who or what?” Answer: *ball*. Lastly, you see if there’s an indirect object: “The boy threw the ball to who or what?” *Me*.

**Classifying the Clauses** (***Not* Mr**. **and Mrs**.)

There’s one more step before punctuating, and that’s deciding what kind of clause each clause is. The two main types are independent and dependent (some say “subor­dinate”). An independent clause has a subject and a verb and can stand by itself. If I came up to you on the sidewalk and said, “He threw me the ball,” you’d think I was weird, but at least I’d have given you a complete thought. But if I came up to you and said, “When he threw me the ball,” and then stood there wait­ing for your response, you wouldn’t just think I was weird, you’d walk away hurriedly. I wouldn’t even have given you a complete thought. That’s because adding *When* to the independent clause makes it dependent. It has to have an independent clause in the sentence that it can “depend” on—for example, “When he threw me the ball, his glove flew off.”

In our first example above, “After he left the house, he found a ball on the way to the store,” there are two clauses (we’ve already anal­yzed the subject-verb combos *he left* and *he found*). The first clause is dependent, and the second is inde­pend­ent. The second can stand by itself; that is, it’s a complete thought. The first would be independent if the first word, *After*, weren’t there; but *After* makes it an incomplete thought. Words added to the beginnings of independent clauses to make them de­pendent are called “subordinating conjunctions.” Here are some of the most common; you don’t have to mem­or­ize them, but familiarize yourself with them enough to be able to recognize them. Try putting each in turn at the beginning of “he left the house,” to get a feel for dependent clauses:

after as if before since that when

although as long as how so that till, until where

as because if though unless while

In summary, the steps that you need to analyze sentences are:

1. **Find the basic clause elements**, in this order.

a) Find ***verbs*** by asking, “What actions are going on (and what helping verbs are there)?”

b) Find ***sub­jects*** by asking, for each verb, “Who or what [verbed]?”

c) Find ***direct objects*** by asking, for each subject-verb combo, “The subject [verbed] who or what?”

d) Find ***indirect objects*** by asking, for each combo, “The subject [verbed] the [direct object] *to* whom or what?”

2. **Classify the clauses** as independent (stands by itself, expresses a complete thought) or dependent (would be independent but starts with a subordinating conjunction).

Now that you can analyze these basics of grammar in your sentences, you’re ready to start “slappin’ in da commas!”

part ii

To place commas correctly, you need to be able to analyze clauses. For that, you need to be able to recognize (in order) verbs, subjects, direct objects, and indirect objects, and be able to classify independent clauses and dependent clauses (by recognizing subordinating conjunctions). In Part II we will abbreviate these terms as follows, adding one more term to be explained in a moment, “coordinating conjunction.”

verb V direct object DO independent clause IC subordinating conjunction sc

subject S indirect object IO dependent clause DC coordinating conjunction cc

You’ll notice that I’ve added a sixth item, “coordinating conjunction.” Unlike subordinating con­junctions, which you only need to familiarize yourself with, you *must* memorize the “cc’s”: recognizing them is crucial. There are only seven: “and,” “or,” “nor,” “for,” “but,” “yet,” “so.” Repeat these rhythmi­cally, as if one word, over and over—“and-or-nor-for-but-yet-so,” “and-or-nor-for-but-yet-so”—until you can rattle them off, days later, without thinking.

Assuming now that you have under your belt the skills explained in Part I, let’s proceed to our main purpose: putting commas in their place.

There are many rules for comma placement; most are rarely used. We’ll list the infrequent ones at the end. But the crucial rules—those which account for about 90% of all com­mas—are only seven in number.

• **IC, cc IC**. This formula says: if you have two independent clauses and there’s a coordinating conjunction between them, put a comma between the first independent clause and the coordinating conjunction. The placement of the comma in the formula (between the first “IC” and “cc”) shows you where the comma should go in your sentences that have this structure.

For example: “She ate cake and ice cream but Jeff and I had pie” is incorrectly punctuated. The subject-verb combos are *she ate* and *Jeff and I had*. (Incidentally, the DOs [direct objects] are *cake and ice cream* and *pie*, and there are no IOs.) Since the sentence has two subject-verb combos, it has two clauses: “She ate cake and ice cream,” and “Jeff and I had pie.” Both are ICs (neither has a subordinating conjunction in front); and between them is the cc, “but.” So, according to the rule “IC, cc IC,” the sentence needs a comma: “She ate cake and ice cream, but Jeff and I had pie.”

Why are there no commas before the other coordinating conjunctions, so that the sentence would read, “She ate cake, and ice cream, but Jeff, and I had pie”? Because those cc’s don’t connect two ICs: they only connect two Ss or two DOs. The biggest problem students have with this first rule is putting commas before cc’s that coordinate things other than ICs. Doing that creates a *comma splice*, so-called because such a comma splices the sentence where it shouldn’t be split.

• **I,C; cc IC**. (or IC; cc I,C.) Normally a semicolon sets off two independent clauses that lack a coordinating conjunction. Compare “The boy went home, but the girl stayed at the theater” to “The boy went home; the girl stayed at the theater.” But suppose you have a case of “IC, cc IC” and one of the two IC’s already has a comma in it. In that case, the comma before the coordinating conjunction gets bumped up to semicolon status: “The boy, though preferring to remain, went home; but the girl stayed at the theater.”

• **DC, IC**. In “He went home; she stayed at the party,” both clauses are ICs. If an sc (subordinating conjunction) were added to the first IC, then that IC would become a DC: “When he went home,” “Although he went home,” “Because he went home,” etc. Then, according to the rule “DC, IC,” you need a comma.

(When a dependent clause follows an independent clause—“IC, DC”—you only need a comma if the dependent clause is not crucial information to understanding the independent clause.)

• **I, DC, C**. A dependent clause in the middle of an independent clause needs commas. “He decided, as you predicted, to act against my advice.”

• **Phrases, IC**. A long phrase or a series of phrases before an independent clause needs a comma. “Beyond the buoy near the southern coral reef, he saw the shark’s fin.”

Also, an introductory phrase with a modifier in it needs a comma. “Swimming [this is a participle, a type of adjective, which is a modifier] beyond the buoy, he saw the sharks’ fin.”

• **Series**. A series is a list of three or more items (e.g., “bells, whistles, and noisemakers”). Sometimes you can omit the last comma, but sometimes you can’t. My advice is, always include it; then you’ll never be wrong. (What if you left out the last comma in “I want to thank my parents, Mother Teresa, and the Pope”?!)

• **Adjectives**. With two or more adjectives, apply this rule: if you can put *and* between them, use a comma: “the tall dark man” can be “the tall and dark man,” so punctuate it “the tall, dark man.” Not so with “dark red ball” or “low brick wall.”

Those are the seven crucial comma rules. The other uses of commas usually don’t give any trouble. If you’re unsure of any of the following examples (or any of the above rules, for that matter), see a style manual. (I recommend: “Editorial Style.” *Webster*’*s New World Dictionary*. 3rd college ed. New York: Webster’s New World, 1988. 1561-62.)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *example* | *rule* |
| “Consequently, he decided to go.” | trans­­i­­­­­­­tion |
| “He said, “Sure.”” | quotation |
| “That he could do it, she believed.” | sen­tence elements out of natural order |
| “She, not he, will go.” | contrasting sen­­­­­­­­­tence elements |
| “He goes there always; she, never.” | omit­ted word or words |
| “21 Elm St., Houston, Tex­as” | address |
| “Frank Smith, Attorney at Law” | title |
| “Jones, Michael J.” | inverted name |
| “Frank, you should go too.” | direct address |
| “Yes, he’s going.” | interjection |
| “Dear Paul,” | salutation |
| “$1,000,000” | number |
| “July 12, 1998” | date |

part iii

Now it’s time to try out what you’ve learned. Here is a sample passage to work on, from Andre Norton’s science-fiction novel, *Dark Piper* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968; rpt. Ballan­tine, 1984). The passage is printed twice. In the first instance, all commas have been deleted; in the second, commas are reinserted. Try punctuating the first with commas (no peeking ahead at the second!). Begin by analyzing a sentence (find verbs, subjects, clauses, etc.), and then apply the seven basic comma rules. After you’ve punctuated all the sentences, compare your commas to the commas in the second version. If your punctuation differs, try to figure out which comma rule you should have applied.

We started shortly after dawn. It was a wet world that faced us but the violence of yesterday was passed. The ground car had been intended to carry equipment throughout the Reserve and by stripping it of all but the seats we had room for the whole party within it. I did not yet activate the distort since I must save that for the approach to Feeholme.

The road was gullied and puddled but the treads of the car were meant to take worse than that smoothly. We ground on at a steady pace. Twice we had to detour around fallen trees and once there were a few anxious moments when we forded a stream and the storm-swollen waters lashed around the sturdy body of the vehicle as high as the seats within.

We caught sight of animals but always at a distance. There was no sign anyone had been there though one of the guidelines for the pickup had broken and whacked against the rod in the pull of the wind.

I thought we might make it by dark and began to prepare Annet now for the further precautions I wanted to take when we reached there. When I spoke of halting the car leaving them in it while I scouted she seemed amiable but it was as if she humored me.

Feeholme was larger than Kynvet because it was the only settlement this side of the mountains. But it was no more than a village probably when compared to towns off-world. It was the headquarters for Rangers.

We crawled on and I kept an anxious eye on the gauges. The worry over the reason for the half-repaired engine was always at the back of my mind. If transportation failed us here it might be grave. But so far there were no signs of trouble.

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