

Make better use of the comma!

General: Commas help the reader. Without commas a reader would often have to go back and reread in order to find out exactly what the author wanted to say. The most important comma rules are given in the following sections. Master them, and your writing will be much better because easier to read.

1. Use a comma between two independent (main) clauses if they are connected by *and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so.* (coordinating conjunctions)

We may leave on Friday, or we may wait until Monday.

First he flew to California, and then he headed for Wisconsin.

But: I wanted to go but could not get my car started. (no two independent clauses)

2. Use a comma between items in a series.

She put down the phone, picked up her purse, and left.

Hurrah for the red, white, and blue.

But: The dear little old lady (no *and* possible in between)

3. Use a comma after every item in an address or date.

He was born on May 17, 1959, in Queen City, Missouri.

4. Use a comma around the name of a person spoken to.

Chris, how about a game of tennis?

But I tell you, Mother, I must have that car.

5. Use commas around expressions that interrupt the natural flow of the sentence.

I think, on the other hand, he may really be right.

He thought, however, that I should wait.

But: Of course I hope they will come. / Therefore we took our plates and left. (no interruption)

6. Use a comma after an introductory expression that doesn't flow into the sentence.

Well, that was the end of that.

Running down the hill, she slipped and fell.

When everyone had left, the theatre was locked up.

7. Use commas around non-essential material.

The Grapes of Wrath, a novel by John Steinbeck, was a best seller.

Gladys Nolan, who is heading the committee, broke her ankle last week. (non-defining relative clause)

Mary Klein, Speaker of the House of Commons, entered the House.
Tom Crandell, a retired railroad man, finally decided to move back to Ponco City.

But: The woman who is heading the committee broke her ankle last week. (**defining relative clause**)

The only person who lived in the house was an old woman. (**defining relative clause**)

8. Use commas to separate quotations from introductory clauses.

He said, "Leave me alone," and left the room.

9. Use a comma after an introductory *Yes* or *No*.

Yes, I'll do it.

No, they aren't.

10. Use a comma in order to avoid a confused, ambiguous, or awkward reading of your sentences.

More important are cases different from German, where there are no commas in English:

- **in front of or after defining relative clauses**

Where is the book (that) I bought yesterday?

- **in front of subject and object clauses (sentences that stand instead of a subject or object)**

He said that he was ill. (There is never a comma before *that* except in a series)

It was not known who the beggar was.

I asked him if he had anything to say.

He did not know what he should do.

- **in front of infinitive and gerund constructions**

He did not know what to do.

The teacher allowed him to go home.

He entered the room without seeing me.

Shut the door before leaving the room.

- **in front of subordinate clauses**

He did not come to my party because he was ill.

I have been studying French since I was fifteen.

I'll speak to him when I come back.

He moved as if he had a stiff neck.

The doorbell rang while his mother was vacuuming the carpet.