Punctuation 2: How to Use Commas (Part 2)
Directed Learning Activity – How to Use Commas (Part Two)

Description: In Part One of this Directed Learning Activity (DLA), you studied three basic rules for using commas. In Part Two, you will learn more detailed rules controlling the use of commas. The comma is the punctuation mark most frequently used in a sentence, and it offers writers a wide range of individual choices. However, many writers don’t know how to use it properly, and they stick commas indiscriminately throughout their paragraphs and essays. The rules in this DLA will help you avoid cluttering your sentences with unnecessary commas and will also help you use commas in a way that will make your writing clear.

Prior Knowledge: While it is not a requirement, the Success Center recommends completing the DLA “How to Use Commas (Part One)” before attempting this activity.

Step One: Understanding Six Sophisticated Uses of Commas

In this DLA, you will learn about six uses of commas that are slightly more sophisticated than those covered in “How to Use Commas (Part One)”: to separate adjectives before nouns; to separate nonessential items in a sentence; to set off elements that interrupt the flow of a sentence; to set off negative insertions and tag questions; with dates, addresses, and titles; and with direct quotes.

Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

I. Use a comma to separate adjectives before nouns.

Explanation: We often use more than one adjective to describe a noun. If the adjectives are coordinate, put a comma between them. (Coordinate means that the adjectives have equal status in describing the noun.) To know whether adjectives are coordinate, you can ask the following questions:

Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?

Does the sentence still make sense if you put an and between the adjectives?

If you answer yes to these questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma. Make sure that you don’t put a comma between the final adjective and the noun.

Examples of coordinate adjectives:

He was a difficult, stubborn child.  
Your cousin has an easy, happy smile.

She bought a red, fuzzy coat.  
He is a strong, healthy man.

Examples of non-coordinate adjectives:

They lived in an ugly white frame house.  
She often wore a gray wool shawl.

The professor gave a hard final exam.  
We stayed at an expensive summer resort.
II. Use a comma to separate nonessential items in a sentence.

**Explanation:** Use a comma for *adjective clauses* or *appositives* that are not essential to a sentence. (*Adjective clauses* describe nouns, and they usually follow the noun that they describe. *Appositives* are usually placed next to another noun that they rename or describe.) If an adjective clause or appositive is necessary for the reader to understand the sentence, *do not* put commas around it. If the clause or appositive is just “oh, by the way” information and can be taken out without interfering with the meaning of the sentence, then you must put a comma before and after it.

**Examples of adjective clauses that are nonessential and need commas:**

- Next Tuesday, which happens to be my birthday, is the only day that I am available to meet.
- Judy, who works for the local school district, is asking her boss for a raise.
- Starbucks, which makes the best coffee in the world, is opening a new location in town.

**Examples of appositives that are nonessential and need commas:**

- Her father, a pediatric surgeon, has to work long hours.
- Edgar Allan Poe, the father of the short story, is buried in Baltimore.
- Susie, John’s sister, is taking dance lessons.

**Examples of adjective clauses and appositives that are essential and do not need commas:**

- The man who is running down the street usually wears an orange sweatshirt. [Who is running down the street tells us who the man is and is therefore essential.]
- The golfer wearing the plaid pants desperately needs to improve his game. [Wearing the plaid pants tells us which golfer.]
- The book that I borrowed from you is excellent. [That I borrowed from you tells us which book.]
- Students who cheat only harm themselves. [Who cheat tells us which students the sentence is talking about.]
- The actor Liam Neeson is starring in a new movie. [Liam Neeson tells us which actor.]

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**Practice 1:** Add commas as needed in the sentences below. If the sentence doesn’t need a comma, write *C – for Correct* – after it.

1. Tom the captain of the team was injured.
2. Did you notice the smart attractive man sitting in the corner?
3. I wore my old oversized light gray sweatsuit.

4. James Spader who plays a lawyer on television won an Emmy Award in 2007.

5. The waiter ignored the rude obnoxious customer.

6. Anyone who walks four dogs at one time must keep the leashes untangled.

7. Professor Jones my history teacher dismissed the class early.

8. Every day Alan drinks a large blended double-chocolate chip iced coffee from Starbucks.

9. The apples that fell out of the basket are bruised.


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III. Use a comma to set off elements that interrupt the flow of a sentence.

**Explanation:** Many words and phrases that are inserted into sentences break the flow of a sentence; they need to be set off with commas. Phrases beginning with words like *such as, especially, particularly, and including* also need to have commas before and after them.

**Examples:**

- She was, however, too tired to make the trip.
- Two hundred dollars, I think, is sufficient.
- The movie, in my opinion, is too scary for children.
- The boss, according to Bill, is not qualified for that position.
- Human cloning, so they say, will be possible within a decade.
- Jones likes to read about dogs, especially Welsh Corgis, in his spare time.
- Service professions, such as social work and teaching, offer many non-monetary rewards.

Another type of interruption is a **direct address**. If you are speaking to a person directly and using his or her name, put commas around the address.

**Examples:**

- Will you, Mary, do that assignment for me?
- Yes, Doctor, I will try to stop smoking.

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IV. Use a comma to set off negative insertions and tag questions.

**Explanation:** Sometimes sentences end with an **expression of contrast** or a **tag question** (a question that confirms what was said before). These elements must be set off with commas.

**Examples:**

- He was merely ignorant, not stupid.
I want chocolate, not vanilla.
His wife, not his brother, needs the money more.
You’re one of the senator’s close friends, aren’t you?
You will come to my dance recital, won’t you?
Matilda asked for spicy food, didn’t she?

Practice 2: Add commas as needed in the sentences below. If the sentence doesn’t need a comma, write C – for Correct – after it.

1. I didn’t realize however that the main character was already dead.
2. Jennifer prefers her hamburgers cooked rare not medium.
3. Mark Twain’s early novels I believe stand the test of time.
4. The field was safe enough wasn’t it?
5. The meal to tell the truth was quite unappetizing.
6. I think you will agree Tom that you are not the best person for the job.
7. I don’t believe he is correct in his opinion do you?
8. I like all ice cream flavors especially chocolate and coffee.
9. You will see for example that the curtains are not attractive.

V. Use commas with dates, addresses, and titles.

Explanation: When a date or address with several parts occurs in a sentence, place a comma between each element and after the last part. Never put a comma between a state name and a ZIP Code. Also, don’t use a comma if you are writing only the month and day or month and a year.

Examples:
The house at 100 W. 67th Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21210, was sold today.
My son was born on January 5, 1976, in Chicago, Illinois.
Who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.?
Kathleen met her husband on December 5, 2003, in Mill Valley, California.

When the date or address has only one element or has its individual parts separated by words in the sentence, do not use a comma within or after the date or address.

Examples without commas:
She lives at 100 West 67 Street in Baltimore.
It was on January 5 that my son was born.
They met in December 2003 in Mill Valley.

If you are using a person’s name with a title, put a comma after the name and one after the title.

Examples:
Mary Jones, Ph.D., will lecture on insect fragmentation today at 4:00 p.m.
Rachel B. Lake, M.D., will be the principal speaker.

VI. Use commas with direct quotes.

Explanation: Commas are used to introduce quotes. They always go inside the quotation mark.

Examples:
He replied, “I have no idea what you mean.”
He actually said, “I do not care.”
“Why,” I asked, “do you always forget to do it?”

Practice 3: Add commas as needed in the sentences below. If the sentence doesn’t need a comma, write C – for Correct – after it.

1. “With your permission” Tom replied “I’ll go home for the day.”
   
2. Helen Lyle Ph.D. gave the opening address.
   
3. On July 14 1904 in a little cottage at 316 High Street Mayville Illinois the wedding took place.
   
4. As of March 1995, his mailing address was 1675 East Union Street Seattle WA 98122.
   
5. John said without emotion “I’ll see you tomorrow.”
   
6. On August 6 1945 the first atomic bomb was dropped.
   
7. September 11 2001 is a day that everyone living at the time will always remember.
   
8. Luis Mendez M.D. gave her the green light to resume her exercise regimen.
   
9. “My wife just gave birth to triplets” Bill said.

Step Two: Editing for Comma Errors

Now that you have learned the rules, it’s time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. The practice exercises in Step Two are meant to help you learn how to edit comma errors.
Read the following sentences. Determine if each sentence is punctuated correctly with commas. If it is, write \textbf{C} – for \textit{Correct} – at the end of the sentence. If it is incorrect, fix the mistake by inserting whatever commas are needed or deleting unnecessary commas. In the blanks next to the sentences, indicate which of these six rules you applied when editing them.

A. Coordinate adjectives
B. Essential/nonessential elements
C. Interrupters
D. Tag questions, negative insertions
E. Address, dates, titles
F. Direct quotes

\textbf{C} 1. I am, as you probably noticed, very nervous about this.  

\textbf{C} 2. Freddy who has a limp was in an auto accident.

\textbf{C} 3. I can go, can’t I?

\textbf{C} 4. I would be happy however to volunteer for the Red Cross.

\textbf{C} 5. Apples which are my favorite fruit are the main ingredient in this recipe.

\textbf{C} 6. My father once said to me “Every obstacle is a steppingstone to success. You should view problems in your life as opportunities to improve yourself.”

\textbf{C} 7. This particular painting appeals to the emotions, not the intellect.

\textbf{C} 8. Men who are bald are frequently the ones who are the most authoritative on the subject of baldness.

\textbf{C} 9. This is my money not yours.

\textbf{C} 10. The uninvited guest wore a dark, blue, tweed suit.

\textbf{C} 11. December 7, 1941 will never be forgotten.


\textbf{C} 13. Lauren, whose pleasing personality impresses many people, is a good friend of mine.

\textbf{C} 14. Walter a librarian by profession studies genealogies as a hobby.
15. The tall man, who is walking into the room right now, will be our instructor for the term.

16. My cat’s pupils had constricted to two, small, black, shining dots.

17. Roberts was a warm, gentle, affectionate father.

18. George will stay if possible with his brother in Laredo.

19. “I believe sir that you have been misinformed” she replied. [This one has two rules that apply.]


For Further Practice:
If you want more practice using commas, go to www.chompchomp.com/exercises.htm and/or www.towson.edu/ows/exercisecomma.htm.
Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student can explain the different uses of a comma outlined in this DLA.

_____ In Step One, the student correctly inserted commas into the sentences in Practice 1, Practice 2, and Practice 3.

_____ In Step Two, the student identified those sentences in which commas were used correctly and those in which they were not. The student then was able to correct those sentences by inserting or deleting commas.

Additional Comments:

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STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!

*You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.*