

Comma Rules – Lesson 1

Perfectly mastering the use of commas is unlikely and unnecessary for most writers. Not all grammar guides agree on every “rule,” and in some cases comma use is a matter of preference. The explanations and exercises that follow, however, will introduce you to the most common rules and help develop an intuitive sense of comma placement and how it affects sentence rhythm.

“FANBOYS” Conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

When two independent sentences are joined by a FANBOYS conjunction, place a comma before the conjunction. In other words, if a sentence contains a “fanboys” conjunction, ask yourself if what comes after that conjunction could stand alone as a complete sentence. If so, place a comma before the conjunction.

Incorrect: Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls yet toy companies continue to market these products without restraint.

The conjunction here is “yet.” Look at what comes before “yet.” Is “Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls” a complete sentence? Yes. Now look at what comes after “yet.” Is “Toy companies continue to market these products without restraint” a complete sentence? Yes. Therefore, place a comma before “yet.”

Correct: Some toy dolls promote unrealistic body images among young girls, yet toy companies continue to market these products without restraint.

Quick Practice

Cover the answers and practice this rule with the following sentences. Not all the sentences are incorrect.

1. Commas can be hard to learn but the “fanboys” rule is easy to understand.
2. My dog Skip has made a new friend down the street and around the corner.
3. You can go to the store with me or you can clean up your room.
4. I was allergic to milk when I was young but now I drink it all the time.
5. Do you want to go to the movie first and then dinner?

Answers

1. Commas can be hard to learn, but the “fanboys” rule is easy to understand.
2. My dog Skip has made a new friend down the street and around the corner.
3. You can go to the store with me, or you can clean up your room.
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Dependent Clauses

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, use a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence. Think of a dependent clause as part of a sentence that “depends” upon another part of a sentence for its meaning. When a sentence begins with the words below (we’ll call them ‘dependent clause’ words), you should know that the sentence will need a comma. These are some of the most common dependent clause words:

If...	Whenever...	Unless...
When...	Before...	Until...
As...	After...	Whatever...
Although...	Since...	While...

Notice how dependent clause words make the sentence need more information to complete a thought.

It is hot outside. (*complete thought*)

When it is hot outside... (*waiting for more information*)

We work together for solutions to the problem. (*complete thought*)

Unless we work together for solutions to the problem... (*waiting for more information*)

The comma is placed between the introductory thought (the dependent clause) and the completing thought (the independent clause).

Correct: When it is hot outside, I like to eat ice cream.

Correct: Unless we work together for a solution to the problem, we will all be in trouble.

Quick Practice

Cover the answers and practice this rule with the following sentences. Not all the sentences are incorrect.

1. If the school board approves our proposal the high school will build a new gym.
2. Before going to the big game next week I need to go buy new shoes.
3. I will see you after your vacation to Thailand.
4. Unless the price of gasoline goes down we can't go to Disneyland next year.
5. I want to take pictures of bears as we drive through Yellowstone Park.

Answers

1. If the school board approves our proposal, the high school will build a new gym.
2. Before going to the big game next week, I need to buy new shoes.
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Introductory Words

Place a comma after a word or expression that introduces a sentence. These words usually indicate a transition or provide commentary on the sentence that follows. Here are some common introductory words.

Finally, the check arrived in the mail.

Unfortunately, it is not what you know but who you know.

Luckily, we won't be going through that whitewater again.

Of course, not everyone enjoys the sensation of jumping out of an airplane.

However, do not get too comfortable with your present situation.

In the end, doing a job imperfectly is better than never trying at all.

First, you should understand the costs involved in starting a business.

Second, you must decide whether you are willing to pay that price.

Next, draft a business plan and let someone review it for potential problems.

Also, don't forget to apply for a business license.

In contrast, those who study and pay attention in class usually do well on exams.

For example, one student who stopped text-messaging in class improved by one letter grade.

In the meantime, he was able to catch up on the meaningless conversations after class.

The above words will not always require a comma when beginning a sentence. You must decide whether the word is functioning as an introductory word or as a core part of the sentence.

Next in line to be CEO is our former coworker Sally Brown.

(not an introductory word)

Next, press the gas pedal to the floor and hold on for your life.

(introductory word)

Of course I love you.
(not an introductory expression)
Of course, not everyone needs to be given so much reassurance.
(introductory expression)

Quick Practice 3

Practice this rule with the following sentences. Not all the sentences are incorrect.

1. For example my father broke his leg when he fell off the roof.
2. However I will need one more day to finish my report.
3. Next Tuesday Brenda will need a babysitter.
4. Unfortunately I have never had the chance to scuba dive.
5. Soon I will be able to sleep in on Saturdays.

Answers

1. For example, my father broke his leg when he fell off the roof.
2. However, I will need one more day to finish my report.
3. Next Tuesday Brenda will need a babysitter.
4. Unfortunately, I have never had the chance to scuba dive.
5. Soon I will be able to sleep in on Saturdays.

Introductory Phrases

Place a comma after a phrase that introduces the main part of a sentence. This rule applies in a way similar to the dependant clause rule. See if you can get a feel for the pause in the following sentences.

Kissing in the display window, the couple drew quite a crowd.

Of all the candidates running for office, he was my least favorite.

Wanting to make an impression, I rented a convertible for my first date.

With that in mind, we can move forward with the proposal.

Quick Practice 4

Practice this rule with the following sentences. Not all the sentences are incorrect.

1. Setting his shovel down our new neighbor came over to greet us.
2. To start jogging all you need is a quality pair of running shoes.
3. Of all the treats my grandma makes for Christmas her fudge is the best.
4. Minding her business Beth decided to not say anything.
5. To screw in the light bulb I stood on the kitchen table.

Answers

1. Setting his shovel down, our new neighbor came over to greet us.
2. To start jogging, all you need is a quality pair of running shoes.
3. Of all the treats my grandma makes for Christmas, her fudge is the best.
4. Minding her business, Beth decided to not say anything.
5. To screw in the light bulb, I stood on the kitchen table.

Follow-up elements

Place a comma before a phrase at the end of a sentence that serves as an afterthought. Sometimes these afterthoughts are short follow-up questions.

It is the first house on the left, *I believe*.

I love getting gifts for Valentine's Day, *especially jewelry*.

The house was quiet, *almost too quiet*.

This is just the one we need, *right?*

Quick Practice 5

Practice this rule with the following sentences.

1. I love the color of the leaves in the fall don't you?
2. I have never had a pet before not even a fish.
3. Sam bought the right napkins didn't he?
4. You haven't graduated yet have you?
5. You said I could borrow your digital camera right?

Answers

1. I love the color of the leaves in the fall, don't you?
2. I have never had a pet before, not even a fish.
3. Sam bought the right napkins, didn't he?
4. You haven't graduated yet, have you?
5. You said I could borrow your digital camera, right?

Items in a Series

Use a comma to separate three or more items in a series. These items can be single words or whole phrases.

My high school buddies and I went to France, Spain, and Italy after we graduated.
Tomorrow I need to wash my laundry, pay the bills, and buy some new shoes.

The most common error with lists is the place the comma before the first item in the list. It is correct to place the comma *after* the first item.

Incorrect: I am looking for a partner who is, trustworthy, caring, and funny.
Correct: I am looking for a partner who is trustworthy, caring, and funny.

Note: While it is more common to put a comma after the second-to-last item (before "and"), some writers and style guides choose to omit it. These exercises use the comma.

Quick Practice 8

Practice this rule with the following sentences.

1. Don't forget to buy milk, diapers, toothpaste, and bread.
2. Some of my favorite hobbies are running, swimming, and backpacking.
3. I love all kinds of music, but my favorites are country and swing.
4. Going to classes, working after school, and babysitting my niece keep me busy all day.
5. I have been to the Denver zoo, the San Diego zoo, and the Portland zoo.

Answers

1. Don't forget to buy milk, diapers, toothpaste, and bread.
2. Some of my favorite hobbies are running, swimming, and backpacking.
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