

COMMAS

We'll review four situations when you must use a comma:

1. To set off a clause that does not change the meaning of a sentence
2. In some dates and addresses
3. To prevent misunderstanding
4. For items in a series

1. COMMAS AND CLAUSES

A clause is set off with commas if it could be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. That rule can be restated in two ways.

First, do not set off a clause with commas if removing the clause would change the meaning of the sentence.

WITH CLAUSE Cars that have faulty brakes are a menace.

WITHOUT CLAUSE Cars are a menace.

Without the clause “that have faulty brakes,” the sentence has a different meaning. Therefore, it would be incorrect to surround the clause with commas.

Second, use commas to set off a clause that does not affect the meaning of the sentence.

WITH CLAUSE Dave's mother, who is 57, is visiting him in July.

WITHOUT CLAUSE Dave's mother is visiting him in July.

In this example, removing the clause “who is 57” does not change the essential meaning of the sentence. The age of Dave's mother is irrelevant to the fact that she's visiting in July. The clause stating her age is therefore set off with commas.

Turn the page for some practice.

PRACTICE

Underline the clauses in these sentences. Then insert commas to set off clauses that don't change the meaning of the sentence.

1. Her e-mail which I received yesterday stated very clearly that the work was to be completed by next month.
2. Activities of our company that are directly related to this program are developed by the Processing Division.
3. Engineers who are new to this procedure should not try to carry it out themselves.
4. The report which was written by hand was submitted on time.

Check your answers on the next page.

ANSWERS

1. Her e-mail, which I received yesterday, stated very clearly that the work was to be completed by next month.
 2. Activities of our company that are directly related to this program are developed by the Processing Division.
 3. Engineers who are new to this procedure should not try to carry it out themselves.
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2. COMMAS IN DATES AND ADDRESSES

In sentences, use commas to set off the year after a day of the month, and the town and state in an address. In addresses and dates, it's often necessary to use commas in pairs.

INCORRECT She lived at 186 Elm Lane Hibbing Minnesota.

CORRECT She lived at 186 Elm Lane, Hibbing, Minnesota.

INCORRECT January 1 1988 was the date of the great flood.

CORRECT January 1, 1988, was the date of the great flood.

When the date consists only of the month and year, omit the comma after the month.

He retired in June 2004.

The magazine was dated April 1996.

Turn the page for some practice.

PRACTICE

Add commas where they're necessary.

1. When the client died on September 28 2007 his policy was still pending.
2. We inspected the property at 230 Clark Street Novato and found that an illegal unit had been constructed.
3. She has been with the company since July 2000.

Check your answers on the next page.

ANSWERS

1. When the client died on September 28, 2007, his policy was still pending.
2. We inspected the property at 230 Clark Street, Novato, and found that an illegal unit had been constructed.
3. She has been with the company since July 2000. [*correct: no comma is necessary between the month and the year*]

3. COMMAS THAT PREVENT MISUNDERSTANDING

Some sentences sound clear in a writer's mind, but could confuse the reader. Commas are invaluable, multipurpose tools to make your meaning clear by showing the reader how you pace your thoughts.

A reader would probably be confused by the unpunctuated, rapid-paced sentences below. In each case, a comma easily clears up the confusion by showing the reader where to pause between ideas.

CONFUSING Although there were jobs for a hundred thousands applied.

CLEAR Although there were jobs for a hundred, thousands applied.

CONFUSING In brief the report will take about an hour.

CLEAR In brief, the report will take about an hour.

Turn the page for some practice.

PRACTICE

Insert commas where you think they're necessary.

ORIGINAL After all the time he has taken has been well spent.

REVISION After all, the time he has taken has been well spent.

1. As you know nothing changed as a result of the investigation.
2. If you want to swim the pool is a block away.
3. To summarize case histories are the most important documents in our files.

Check your answers on the next page.

ANSWERS

1. As you know, nothing changed as a result of the investigation.
2. If you want to swim, the pool is a block away.
3. To summarize, case histories are the most important documents in our files.

4. THE SERIES COMMA

Finally, without commas, three or more items in a series can run into one another. The result can be confusing.

Alphonse's first assignments will be to clean the shelves move the filing cabinets put the books in alphabetical order and take the out-dated files to the warehouse.

Commas make it clear that each item in the series—in this case, four activities—is separate.

Alphonse's first assignments will be to clean the shelves, move the filing cabinets, put the books in alphabetical order, and take the out-dated files to the warehouse.

“Red, white, and blue” is an example of three **items in a series**. The most common conjunctions for items in a series are the words *and* and *or*.

One of the most common punctuation questions is whether to use a comma before the final conjunction in a series of three or more items. This punctuation is sometimes called the **series comma**. In fact, there is no hard-and-fast rule about including or omitting the series comma.

**WITHOUT SERIES
COMMA** The store has the shirt in red, blue, green and yellow.

**WITH SERIES
COMMA** The store has the shirt in red, blue, green, and yellow.

In most situations, you can use the series comma or omit it, as long as you *consistently* use it or omit it throughout your entire document. But you must use the series comma whenever a sentence would be confusing without it.

**WITHOUT SERIES
COMMA
(CONFUSING AND
INCORRECT)**

The tasks our group must complete by next Wednesday include editing the brochure, preparing the mailing list and printing the labels and printing and mailing the brochures.

**WITH SERIES
COMMA
(CLEAR AND
CORRECT)**

The tasks our group must complete by next Wednesday include editing the brochure, preparing the mailing list and printing the labels, and printing and mailing the brochures.

The series comma always goes before the conjunction, and never after it.

INCORRECT

Send the company treasurer your last three pay stubs, a copy of your federal tax return and, copies of any form 1099s you might have received.

CORRECT

Send the company treasurer your last three pay stubs, a copy of your federal tax return, and copies of any form 1099s you might have received.

SOME ORGANIZATIONS HAVE RULES ABOUT COMMA USAGE. If your organization doesn't have this kind of rule, we recommend always using the series comma before the conjunction. Then you'll never have to ask yourself whether the comma will prevent confusion, and you'll never be wrong.

**Before practicing the use of commas in a series,
take a look at the use of semicolons and colons.**