Commas

Serial Commas

Use a comma to separate the elements in a series (three or more things), including the last two.

Example: "He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base."

You may have learned that the comma before the "and" is unnecessary. This is true sometimes, but not all the time. Note the differences between the sentences in the following example:

Sally is making three different kinds of pancakes. The types of pancake are as follows:

1. Chocolate chip
2. Banana
3. Buckwheat

In explaining her pancakes to a friend, she can write a sentence in one of two ways:

1. I made chocolate chip, banana and buckwheat pancakes.
2. I made chocolate chip, banana, and buckwheat pancakes.

Note that, in the first example, the reader may become confused, believing that Sally has made only two types of pancake: chocolate chip, and banana-buckwheat.

Using a comma between all the items in a series, including the last two, avoids this problem. This last comma—the one between the word "and" and the preceding word—is often called the serial comma or the Oxford comma.

In newspaper writing, incidentally, you will seldom find a serial comma, but that is not necessarily a sign that it should be omitted in academic prose.

Introductory elements

When a sentence begins with an adverbial clause, put a comma after the clause.

• Although we had reviewed the film twice before, we never noticed these details about the shooting.
• As the day drew to a smoky end, the firefighters put out the last of the embers.
It is permissible, even commonplace, to omit a comma after most brief introductory elements — a prepositional phrase, an adverb, or a noun phrase:

- Yesterday afternoon we sat around waiting for Bill to arrive.
- By evening we had become impatient.

When a prepositional phrase expands to more than three words, say, or becomes connected to yet another prepositional phrase, the use of a comma will depend on the writer’s sense of the rhythm and flow of the sentence.

- After his nap Figueroa felt better.
- After his long nap in the backyard hammock, Figueroa felt better.

When an introductory adverbial element seems to modify the entire sentence and not just the verb or some single element in the rest of the sentence, put a comma after it.

- Fortunately, no one in the bridal party was in that car.
- Sadly, the old church was completely destroyed.
- On the other hand, someone obviously was badly injured.

Don't allow a brief introductory element to merge with something following it in a way that can confuse your reader. Try reading the following sentences without their commas:

- Until the spring course lists will not be published.
- Until the spring, course lists will not be published.

- Inside the gym was bright and clean.
- Inside, the gym was bright and clean.

When a sentence begins with an Absolute Phrase or an adverbial Infinitive Phrase, put a comma after it. (If the infinitive phrase is acting as a noun and is the subject of the sentence, be careful not to put a comma between the subject and its verb: "To believe in one's self is a good thing."

- Their headpieces flapping wildly about their ears, the priestesses began their eerie chant.
- To escape with our lives, we would have to run for the exits.

**Introductory Clauses**

Introductory clauses are dependent clauses that provide background information or "set the stage" for the main part of the sentence, the independent clause. For example:
If they want to win, athletes must exercise every day. (introductory dependent clause, main clause)

Because he kept barking insistently, we threw the ball for Smokey. (introductory dependent clause, main clause)

Introductory clauses start with adverbs like after, although, as, because, before, if, since, though, until, when, etc.

Introductory Phrases

Introductory phrases also set the stage for the main action of the sentence, but they are not complete clauses. Phrases don't have both a subject and a verb that are separate from the subject and verb in the main clause of the sentence. Common introductory phrases include prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, participial phrases, infinitive phrases, and absolute phrases.

To stay in shape for competition, athletes must exercise every day. (introductory infinitive phrase, main clause)

Barking insistently, Smokey got us to throw his ball for him. (introductory participial phrase, main clause)

A popular and well respected mayor, Bailey was the clear favorite in the campaign for governor. (introductory appositive phrase, main clause)

The wind blowing violently, the townspeople began to seek shelter. (introductory absolute phrase, main clause)

After the adjustment for inflation, real wages have decreased while corporate profits have grown. (introductory prepositional phrases, main clause)

Introductory Words

Introductory words like however, still, furthermore, and meanwhile create continuity from one sentence to the next.

The coaches reviewed the game strategy. Meanwhile, the athletes trained on the Nautilus equipment.

Most of the evidence seemed convincing. Still, the credibility of some witnesses was in question.
When to Use a Comma

Introductory elements often require a comma, but not always. Use a comma in the following cases:

- After an introductory clause. (Does the introductory element have a subject and verb of its own?)
- After a long introductory prepositional phrase or more than one introductory prepositional phrase. (Are there more than five words before the main clause?)
- After introductory verbal phrases, some appositive phrases, or absolute phrases.
- If there is a distinct pause. (When you read the sentence aloud, do you find your voice pausing a moment after the introductory element?) to avoid confusion. (Might a reader have to read the sentence more than once to make sense of it?)

When Not to Use a Comma

Some introductory elements don't require a comma, and sometimes the subject of a sentence looks like an introductory element but isn't. Do not use a comma in the following cases:

- After a brief prepositional phrase. (Is it a single phrase of fewer than five words?)
- After a restrictive (essential) appositive phrase. (See our document on appositives.)
- To separate the subject from the predicate. (See below.)

Each of the following sentences may look like it requires a comma after the opening segment (marked with an x), but the opening segment is really the subject. It's sometimes easy to confuse gerund- or infinitive-phrase subjects like the following with nonessential introductory phrases, so be careful.

Preparing and submitting his report to the committee for evaluation and possible publication[x] was one of the most difficult tasks Bill had ever attempted.

To start a new business without doing market research and long-term planning in advance[x] would be foolish.

Extracting the most profit for the least expenditure on labor and materials[x] is the primary goal of a capitalist.
Note:

These lessons on commas have been culled from the following websites, which are excellent sources for further elucidation concerning comma usage:

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/commas_big.htm#1

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/03/