

MLA Rules for Comma Use

1. **Before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, or yet*) joining independent clauses in a sentence.**
 - a. Ex: Congress passed the bill, and the president signed it into law.
 - b. **No comma if the sentence is short and the connection between the clauses can't be misinterpreted without punctuation.**
 - i. Ex: Wallace sings and Armstrong plays cornet.
2. **Separate words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence.**
 - a. Ex: **Words:** Boccaccio's tales have inspired plays, films, operas, and paintings.
 - b. **Phrases:** Alfred the Great established a system of fortified towns, reorganized the military forces, and built a fleet of warships.
 - c. **Clauses:** In the Great Depression, millions lost their jobs, businesses failed, and charitable institutions closed their doors.
3. **Between coordinate adjectives (adjs that separately modify the same noun).**
 - a. Ex: Critics praise the novel's unaffected, unadorned style. (The adjectives *unaffected* and *unadorned* each modify style.)
 - b. **NOT:** A famous photo shows Marianna Moore in a black tricornered hat. (The adj *black* modifies *tricornered hat*.)
4. **To set off a parenthetical comment, or aside, if it is brief and closely related to the rest of the sentence.**
 - a. Ex: The Tudors, for example, ruled for over a century.

5. To set off nonrestrictive (unessential) appositives.

a. Ex: Isabel Allende, the Chilean novelist, will appear at the arts forum tonight.

b. Restrictive (essential) appositives do not require commas.

i. Ex: The Chilean novelist Isabel Allende will appear at the arts forum tonight.

6. To set off non restrictive clauses beginning with *Who, Whom, Whose, Which, and That*.

a. Ex: Scientists, who must observe standards of objectivity in their work, can contribute usefully to public-policy debates.

b. Restrictive *Who, etc.* clauses don't need commas.

i. Ex: Scientists who receive the Nobel Prize sometimes contribute usefully to public-policy debates. (only scientists who receive the Prize contribute usefully)

7. To set off nonrestrictive adverbial phrases and clauses.

a. Ex: The novel takes place in China, where many languages are spoken.

b. Restrictive adverbial clauses don't need commas.

i. Ex: The novel takes place in a land where many languages are spoken.

8. After a long introductory phrase or clause.

a. Ex: Phrase: After years of anxiety over the family's finances, Linda Loman looks forward to the day the mortgage will be paid off.

b. Clause: Although she was virtually unknown in her day, scholars have come to recognize the originality of her work.

9. To set off alternative or contrasting phrases.

a. Ex: It is Julio, not his mother, who sets the plot in motion.

10. In a date whose order is month, day, and year.

a. Ex: Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, and died on April 4, 1968.

Common Comma Errors

1. **Between a subject and verb.**

- a. Ex: Many of the characters who dominate the early chapters and then disappear, are portraits of the author's friends.

2. **Between a verb and object.**

- a. Ex: The agent reported to the headquarters staff, that the documents had been traced to an underground garage.

3. **Between parts of a compound subject, compound object, or compound verb.**

- a. Ex:
 - i. **Subj.** A dozen wooden chairs, and a window that admits a shaft of light complete the stage setting.
 - ii. **Obj.** Ptolemy devised a system of astronomy accepted until the sixteenth century, and a scientific approach to the study of geography.
 - iii. **Verb.** He composed several successful symphonies, but won the most fame for his witticisms.

4. **Between two parallel subordinate elements.**

- a. Ex: She broadens her analysis by exploring the tragic elements of the play, and by integrating the hunting motif with the themes of death and resurrection.

5. **Between a month and a year or between a season and a year.**

- a. Ex: The events of July, 1789 are as familiar to the French as those of July, 1776 are to Americans.
- b. Ex: I passed my oral exams in spring, 2007.