

COMMAS

1. Uses of Commas

2. Common Errors

1. Uses of Commas

Skilful use of commas is vital for clear writing; comma-free sentences may have to be re-parsed by the reader, who may find out too late where the commas should have been.

To enclose additional or parenthetical information

Commas are used to enclose additional—parenthetical—information within two parts of a sentence. The sentence would still make sense if the additional information were removed. Commas are needed both *before* and *after* this additional information:

The survey was cancelled.

The survey, which contained inappropriate questions, was cancelled.

The additional middle clause gives specific information about why the survey was cancelled. However, the sentence would still be accurate and correct without this information. Compare this with the sentence below:

The project that was too expensive was cancelled.

This sentence tells us more about which project was cancelled, rather than why. It contains the implication that no other project was cancelled, and this is because in this sentence, the phrase ‘that was too expensive’ is not an extraneous, removable part of the text: it is not additional material but ‘defining’ material. In this sort of situation either both commas are needed or neither; it depends on whether the material is extra or whether it is integral to the meaning.

To decide whether the commas should enclose the middle clause, decide first of all if the meaning of the sentence becomes incorrect without the clause. If the meaning becomes incorrect without the clause then commas should not be used. If the sentence is still accurate without the additional information, then both commas are needed.

After an opening clause or phrase

Commas are used after an opening clause or phrase:

After the students had gone home, she poured herself a much-needed whisky.

For example, the Milgram experiments gave philosophers much to think about.

However, St Andrews was the only church that did not have stained glass windows.

But the comma can be omitted if the clause/phrase is short and the omission doesn’t cause confusion:

Before the meeting she reviewed the documentation.

To separate unrelated numbers

If two sets of unrelated numbers are given side by side, a comma can be used to separate the numbers as an aid to clarity:

By 1995, 33 per cent of the Australia’s population was not so inclined.

In lists of items

Where there are several items listed in a sentence and separated by commas, there is no comma before the final ‘and’.

His sandwich was filled with lettuce, cheese and tomato.

However, if confusion is likely to result from the omission of the comma, leave it in:

He ate pancakes, sausages, and raspberries with cream.

(Cf. ‘*He ate pancakes, sausages and raspberries with cream.*’ Everything had cream?)

Around ‘however’

‘However’ should be followed and/or preceded by a comma in contexts where it means ‘but’.

Contrast:

However, we may decide this matter next week, before we leave.

However we may decide this matter, next week, before we leave, . . .

Sometimes more than a comma is needed (e.g. for disambiguation). Contrast:

Yesterday he arrived early; however, today he was late.

Yesterday he arrived early, however; today he was late.

2. Common Comma Errors

Commas are frequently put in the wrong location around parenthetical material (this error is very common when clauses are joined with ‘and’ or ‘but’). The sentence should still make sense and be grammatically correct if the material between the commas is removed:

Correct: *The truck arrived at 07.00 but, because I was still in bed, the driver had to wait.*

Incorrect: *The truck arrived at 07.00, but because I was still in bed, the driver had to wait.*

Often only one comma is used for parenthetical information. Two are required:

Correct: *Barbara Davis, who worked as a librarian, was a remarkable author in her own right.*

Incorrect: *Barbara Davis, who worked as a librarian was a remarkable author in her own right.*

Incorrect: *Barbara Davis who worked as a librarian, was a remarkable author in her own right.*

Commas are often wrongly put between a subject and its verb, particularly when the sentence is long:

Correct: *Honours students at UWA’s School of Engineering found that it is uneconomical for homeowners to install conservation equipment because water is so inexpensive.*

Incorrect: *Honours students at UWA’s School of Engineering, found that it is uneconomical for homeowners to install conservation equipment because water is so inexpensive.*

Correct: *The actors who were rehearsing for Bell Shakespeare’s forthcoming production of Hamlet spent most of their time in the theatre.*

Incorrect: *The actors who were rehearsing for Bell Shakespeare’s forthcoming production of Hamlet, spent most of their time in the theatre.*