

Comma Rules

What is a Comma? Why should I use it?

A comma (,) represents a brief pause. It improves the flow of writing and helps readers better understand written ideas. Are the following sentences clear without commas?

If I study hard I will learn more information remember it longer and improve my grades.

When I joined a study group it helped me focus on learning the course material which is sometimes difficult for me practice explaining the material to others and perform better on essays exams and quizzes.

Let's see how using commas can separate the different ideas in these sentences, making them much easier to read and understand.

If I study hard, I will learn more information, remember it longer, and improve my grades.

When I joined a study group, it helped me to focus on learning the course material, which is sometimes difficult for me, to practice explaining the material to others, and to perform better on essays, exams, and quizzes.

General Guideline and Strategy for Using Commas

Read your writing out loud. Pause when it seems natural to do so. Ask yourself, does this pause improve the flow of my writing? If it does, then you probably need a comma there. If it does not, then you do not need it.

Similarly, you should pause at each comma that you already included in your writing. Ask yourself if the pause improved the flow of your ideas. If it does, then you probably used the comma correctly. If it does not, then you should probably delete it.

Specific Rules for Using Commas

Always use a comma:

- **Between individual items in a list of three or more items**
 - I went to the store for milk, eggs, and bread. Vs. I went to the store for milk and eggs.
- **Before a Conjunction that joins two complete sentences** (conjunctions include **For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So – Fan Boys**)
 - I liked writing, **so** I studied it in school. Vs. I liked writing and studied it in school.
- **After Introductory Phrases and Transition Words/Phrases** (words that come at the beginning of your sentence but could be deleted without making the sentence confusing or incomplete)
 - **When I went to school**, I liked and studied writing.
- **Before “which” when it starts a phrase that finishes a sentence**
 - My school had a very large student body, **which scared me as a freshman**.
- **Both Before and After Dependent Clauses placed in the middle of a sentence** (a dependent clause does not express a complete thought; it adds interesting information to the sentence, but it could be deleted without making the sentence confusing or incomplete)
 - Professor Smith, **who is an older man**, has very traditional values about education.
 - Last Tuesday, **which was my birthday**, was an awful day!