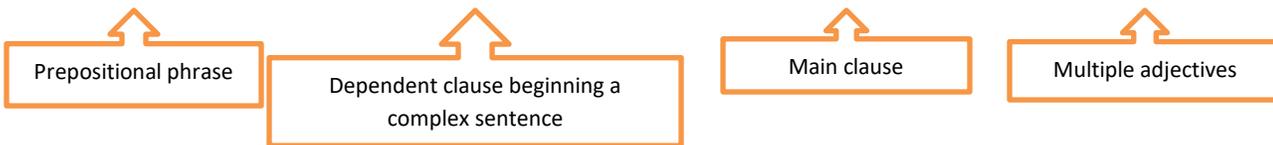


## The Comma

In written English, the comma is used to separate sentences into distinct segments of information. These segments can be clauses, phrases, or even individual words, but in every case the comma helps the reader understand the function of each segment as it relates to the over-arching idea conveyed in the sentence.

**“Every Thursday, if the weather is nice, Paul plays basketball with Paul’s energetic, young son.”**



In this example, the main idea is: **“Paul plays basketball with Paul’s son.”** All of the commas in the sentence are placed around words or phrases that add extra information to this main idea: **“Every Thursday”** tells the reader when this idea takes place; **“if the weather is nice”** sets a condition on the idea; and **“energetic, young”** further qualifies the **“son”**. Notice, however, that commas do not separate anything in the main idea, and this is especially true with nouns and their respective verbs.

**Important note:** When you are revising your writing, remember that the placement of commas depends on the separation of information into distinct segments and is **NOT** related to pauses for breath in spoken English.

### Major Uses of the Comma

- 1) Separating items in a series:** Use commas between different nouns in a list of three or more items to show that those items are separate from one another. **Ex. “The nucleobases in DNA are adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine.”** **Note** – For the sake of clarity, each item in the list is underlined and, though the final comma in a series is not necessary, it is often a good idea to include it because its omission can cause confusion in the case of compound nouns. **Ex. “The nucleobase pairs in DNA are adenine and thymine and cytosine and guanine.”** In this example, the list still has four nouns, but those nouns are now expressed as two distinct items (rather than four), and so no comma is needed.
- 2) Multiple Adjectives:** Use commas between two or more adjectives that modify the same noun or pronoun. **Ex. “Sara is a kind, considerate, caring person.”**
- 3) Times and Places:** Use commas to separate the different components of dates and locations. **Ex. Charlotte was born on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1957, and lives at 22 Acacia Avenue, London, England.”**
- 4) Prepositional Phrases:** Use commas at the end of a prepositional word or phrase *only* when that word or phrase begins a sentence. **Ex. “Yesterday, I walked to school.” “At 6:15pm on Tuesday, April 7<sup>th</sup> on the fifth floor of the Business Centre, we will meet.”** Do not include a comma if the preposition does not begin the sentence. **Ex. “I walked to school yesterday.”**

- 5) **Transitional Phrases:** Use commas to offset an introductory word or transitional phrase at the beginning of a sentence. **Ex.** “**Furthermore, the analysis is flawed.**” “**For that reason, I will re-analyze the study’s results.**”
- 6) **Compound Sentences:** Use commas between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). **Ex.** “**I like candy floss, but Kelly likes candy apples.**” **Note** – When the subject of the compound sentence takes more than one verb, it is often possible to eliminate the second reference to that subject as well as the comma. **Ex.** “**I like candy floss but love candy apples.**”
- 7) **Complex Sentences:** Use commas between a dependent and an independent clause whenever the dependent clause (indicated by subordinating conjunctions like *because, although, if, when,* etc.) comes at the beginning of the sentence. **Ex.** “**Because I need money, I will find a job.**” **Note** – Commas are not needed when the dependent clause finishes the sentence. **Ex.** “**I will find a job because I need money.**”
- 8) **Non-Restrictive Clauses:** Use commas to isolate non-restrictive clauses, phrases that further qualify a noun in the sentence, from the main sentence. **Note** – Non-restrictive clauses usually begin with “, which” or “, who”. **Ex.** “**The wallet, which was full of money, was found on the street.**” The idea the writer wants to convey in this example is “The wallet was found on the street.” The writer wants to add more information about the wallet, and so ‘wedges’ this information into the middle of the sentence.
- 9) **Appositives:** Use commas to isolate appositives, a type of non-restrictive clause that adds more information to the sentence’s subject, from the rest of the sentence. **Ex.** “**Mick Jagger, the lead singer of *The Rolling Stones*, is quite rich.**” **Note** – As with non-restrictive clauses, the best way of ensuring that you have used commas in the proper place is to identify the noun (Mick Jagger) and the verb that goes with that noun (is) and then include commas respectively following and preceding those words.

### Practice Exercises

Add commas wherever necessary in the following sentences:

- 1) In July the weather is usually hot hazy and humid.
- 2) Alice Munro one of Canada’s best-known novelists spends summers in Clinton Ontario and winters in Comox British Columbia.
- 3) As a rule you should never try to pet a skunk a wolf or a hyena.
- 4) Tokyo which is the most populous city in the world is a nice place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there.
- 5) If you don’t know how to use commas I hope you read this handout carefully.

### Answers

- 1) In July, the weather is usually hot, hazy, and humid.
- 2) Alice Munro, one of Canada’s best-known novelists, spends summers in Clinton, Ontario, and winters in Comox, British Columbia.
- 3) As a rule, you should never try to pet a skunk, a wolf, or a hyena.
- 4) Tokyo, which is the most populous city in the world, is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there.
- 5) If you don’t know how to use commas, I hope you read this handout carefully.