Commas  (from the Charles Darwin University and Purdue University websites)

As a general guide, commas (written as ,) are used when you would normally pause for breath when speaking.

Commas are used to indicate general subdivisions within a sentence. There are four major areas in which commas are needed:

- to separate nouns or noun phrases within a list,
- to mark off parenthetical phrases or asides,
- to separate independent from dependent clauses, and
- to separate two independent clauses that are joined to form one sentence.

Separating nouns in a list

Examples:

- George brought orange juice, chips, and beer.
- Fred brought a bat and ball, a card table and four chairs, and three hurricane lamps.

Note that a comma is placed before the final “and” in each list.

Charlotte’s note: If Fred also bought a catcher’s mitt, semicolons would be more appropriate for separating the list into categories of second-hand items:

- Fred brought a bat, ball, and mitt; a card table and four chairs; and three hurricane lamps.

Marking off parenthetical clauses

A parenthetical phrase provides additional information for your reader, but which could be left out of the sentence without altering its basic message. Some examples:

- The practice of sterilizing one's instruments, originally observed by a few eccentrics, has now become standard in most hospitals.
- Political science, therefore, is remarkably flexible.
- The police, although understaffed, manage to maintain the peace.

In each of these sentences, the words between the commas could be left out without changing the core meaning of the sentence. By including a parenthetical clause, the writer adds information (as in the case of the first and third sentences) or emphasis (as in the second sentence).

Separating independent from dependent clauses or phrases

Charlotte’s note: independent clauses are clauses—could be complete sentences—that can stand alone. Dependent clauses or phrases cannot form a complete sentence without being linked with the independent clause. The independent clauses are bold in the examples below.
• Although he was ill, **he went to work.**
• Therefore, **political science is remarkably flexible.**
• Even if you get to Rome, **you still have to find them.**
• **I will do the job,** despite the low pay.

**Separating independent clauses joined to form a single sentence**

Commas can separate two independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction such as 'and', 'or', 'but', 'nor', 'so', 'for', and 'yet'. For example:

- History is an interesting subject, and many students enjoy it.
- Exercise is necessary for good health, but it should not be overdone.
- Learning about punctuation can be boring, yet it is essential for writing clearly.

Two common errors with the use of commas are known as **comma splice** and the **run-on sentence.**

A **comma splice** occurs when the coordinating conjunction is left out. This leaves the independent clauses separated only by the comma. For example:

- History is an interesting subject, many students enjoy it.
- Exercise is necessary for good health, it should not be overdone.
- Learning about punctuation can be boring, it is essential for writing clearly.

A **run-on sentence** occurs when both the comma and the coordinating conjunction are left out. For example:

- History is an interesting subject many students enjoy it.
- Exercise is necessary for good health it should not be overdone.
- Learning about punctuation can be boring it is essential for writing clearly.

There is no separation between the independent clauses. One sentence runs on into the next.

**General Guidelines for Using Commas**

- You should use commas to indicate natural pauses.
- You should use a comma if its omission would leave the meaning of the sentence ambiguous.
- You should use a comma when a dependent clause begins a sentence.
- You can use commas to enclose phrases that are introduced within independent clauses.
- You should not overuse commas.

Independent and Dependent Clauses (Definitions)

When you want to use commas and semicolons in sentences and when you are concerned about whether a sentence is or is not a fragment, a good way to start is to be able to recognize dependent and independent clauses. The definitions offered here will help you with this.

This handout will define independent and dependent clauses, explain proper ways to punctuate sentences that use them, and note some common errors to avoid.

Definitions

**Independent Clause (IC)**

An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. An independent clause is a sentence.

**Example:** Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz. (IC)

**Dependent Clause (DC)**

A dependent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot be a sentence. Often a dependent clause is marked by a dependent marker word.

**Example:** When Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz . . . (DC)

**Dependent Marker Word (DM)**

A dependent marker word is a word added to the beginning of an independent clause that makes it into a dependent clause.

**Example:** When Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz, it was very noisy. (DM)

Some common dependent markers are: after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, and while.

**Connecting dependent and independent clauses**

There are two types of words that can be used as connectors at the beginning of an independent clause: coordinating conjunctions and independent marker words.

1. Coordinating Conjunction (CC)

The seven coordinating conjunctions used as connecting words at the beginning of an independent clause are and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet. When the second independent clause in a sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is needed before the coordinating conjunction:
Example: Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz, **but** it was hard to concentrate because of the noise. (CC)

**2. Independent Marker Word (IM)**

An independent marker word is a connecting word used at the beginning of an independent clause. These words can always begin a sentence that can stand alone. When the second independent clause in a sentence has an independent marker word, a semicolon is needed before the independent marker word.

Example: Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz; **however**, it was hard to concentrate because of the noise. (IM)

Some common independent markers are: **also, consequently, furthermore, however, moreover, nevertheless, and therefore.**

**Proper Punctuation Methods**

This table gives some examples of ways to combine independent and dependent clauses and shows how to punctuate them properly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IC, IC.</th>
<th>I went to the store. I didn't buy any bread.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IC; IC.</td>
<td>I went to the store; I didn't buy any bread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC, CC</td>
<td>I went to the store, but I didn't buy any bread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC, IM,</td>
<td>I went to the store; however, I didn't buy any bread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC, IC.</td>
<td>When I went to the store, I didn't buy any bread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC DC.</td>
<td>I didn't buy any bread when I went to the store.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Some Common Errors to Avoid**

**Comma Splices**

A comma splice is the use of a comma between two independent clauses. You can usually fix the error by changing the comma to a period and therefore making the two clauses into two separate sentences, by changing the comma to a semicolon, or by making one clause dependent by inserting a dependent marker word in front of it.

Incorrect: I like this class, it is very interesting.

Correct: I like this class. It is very interesting.

(or) I like this class; it is very interesting.

(or) I like this class, and it is very interesting.
I like this class because it is very interesting.

Because it is very interesting, I like this class.

**Fused Sentences**

Fused sentences happen when there are two independent clauses not separated by any form of punctuation. This error is also known as a run-on sentence. The error can sometimes be corrected by adding a period, semicolon, or colon to separate the two sentences.

Incorrect: My professor is intelligent I've learned a lot from her.

Correct: My professor is intelligent. I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent; I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent, and I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent; moreover, I've learned a lot from her.

**Sentence Fragments**

Sentence fragments happen by treating a dependent clause or other incomplete thought as a complete sentence. You can usually fix this error by combining it with another sentence to make a complete thought or by removing the dependent marker.

Incorrect: Because I forgot the exam was today.

Correct: Because I forgot the exam was today, I didn't study.

(or) I forgot the exam was today.