Using Commas

What is a comma?

A comma is a form of punctuation that helps your reader to understand the inflection that can’t be heard on paper. You may be able to tell where a comma should be placed if you listen to natural pauses when the sentence is read aloud.

Commas help us to
- list several items in a row,
- fix run-on sentences,
- separate out introductory phrases and words,
- set off quotations, and
- enclose phrases.

To list items in a series

When listing more than two items in a row, put a comma after each of those items. The last two items are usually separated by the word “and.” In college papers, there should be a comma prior to the word “and.”

Conjunctions “or” and “nor” may also be used when listing items.

Examples:
I need to go to the grocery store to buy milk, bread, butter, and eggs.

The dog didn’t want the bone, the water, or the chew toy
To stop a run-on sentence

A sentence becomes a run-on sentence when two complete thoughts (separate sentences) are included AND they are not correctly punctuated. One way to fix a run-on sentence is to separate the two complete thoughts with a comma and a conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so). Note: the comma goes before the conjunction, not after.

Examples:
The painters are coming tomorrow, and the carpet layers will be here the following day.

He doesn’t play tennis very well, but he is an excellent swimmer.

To end an introductory phrase

An introductory phrase is a phrase at the beginning of the sentence which is not part of the main sentence. When an introductory phrase has more than three or four words, it should be followed by a comma.

Introductory phrases often begin with such words as “after,” “although,” “as,” “because,” “before,” “if,” “since,” “unless,” “when,” and “while.”

After the student signed up for classes, she bought her books.

Before the night was over, the baby was born.

If she hadn’t lost the tickets, she would have spent the evening enjoying the opera.

With introductory words

Some introductory words such as “yes,” “however,” and “well” also should be followed by a comma.

Examples:
Yes, I did see the accident happen.

However, that does not mean that I agree with the proposal.
In quotations

Commas should be used to set off a direct quotation from words that describe who is speaking.

Examples:
The clerk said, “We don’t carry that particular product.”

“You can’t come in here without a pass,” said the guard.

To enclose a phrase

Some phrases aren’t needed in a sentence but give a clearer picture of what the speaker is trying to say. These nonessential phrases should be set off by a comma.

To determine whether part of a sentence is nonessential, try to leave out the part set off by commas. If the sentence doesn’t make sense without that phrase, then it is essential to the sentence.

Examples of nonessential phrases:
The car, which was in the wrong lane, ran into the oncoming truck.

George Washington, the first president of the United States, went back to farming after his presidency.

The children, it seemed, were late for the party.

Most phrases that begin with “that” are essential to the sentence and should not be set off with commas. The essential phrases are underlined in the examples below.

The DVD that I borrowed from you is lost.

He thinks that he is invincible.

Taxpayers who don’t pay taxes should be prosecuted.

When NOT to use a comma:

Don’t add commas “just because.” If you are interrupting the flow of the sentence (creating an unnatural pause), you probably do not need a comma.