

LINDENWOOD

U N I V E R S I T Y

WRITING CENTER

Common Mistakes When It Comes to Comma Usage

When it comes to using commas, one should always consider what it is they are attempting to present and convey in their writing. Commas can be used for rhetorical purposes, in addition to their own grammatical guidelines and restrictions. In some areas of writing, comma usage is unique to the voice of the writer, a tool meant to impart emphasis to where the author desires the reader's interest and attention to be.

Though commas are a common component of the written world, comma usage may be often misused and abused, if incorporated incorrectly. This module will address some of the common errors and mistakes made when using commas.

1. **The Comma vs. The Semicolon**

When it comes to separating phrases or sentences, both commas and semicolons share some similarities, but they are certainly different. Commonly, commas are used to separate phrases more often than to separate two complete sentences or clauses, which is what a semicolon's primary function is.

A semicolon acts in a way that loosely joins two sentences together, without removing either sentence's independence; for a semicolon to be used, the two clauses must be able to stand on their own while still maintaining some relevance to one another.

Example: James thought he could make it home before midnight; he was wrong.

Example: People didn't often go near the woods; they knew nothing good ever came from there.

Commas are typically used to separate dependent phrases from independent clauses; one portion of the sentence cannot stand without the other. Additionally, commas separate information that may not be imperative to the overall sentence structure.

Example: James stayed out longer than he should have, which his mom warned him about.

Example: People didn't often go near the woods, but James liked to.

2. Comma Splices

Using a comma to conjoin two independent clauses is what is known as a comma splice. This type of error is classified as a run-on sentence and can be corrected like most run-on sentences. D'Youville College lists a few ways this correction can be made:

1. Replace the comma with a period and make two different sentences. *Today I am tired. I will take a nap later.*
2. Join the two sentences correctly by adding a coordinate conjunction after the comma. *Today I am tired, so I will take a nap later.*
3. Join the two separate sentences correctly by inserting a semi colon (;). *Today I am tired; I will take a nap later.*
4. subordinate one clause (make one clause dependent and one independent). *Since I am tired today, I will take a nap later.*

3. Introductory Phrases

Another common mistake made when it comes to comma usage often occurs with introductory phrases. More often than not, students may begin their sentences with contextual information that may or may not be essential to the entirety of the clause. Regardless of its essential nature, these opening phrases should be set off from the independent portion of the sentence. Purdue OWL features many examples that can help to understand introductory phrases more clearly:

Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include: after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while.

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.

Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.

If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.

When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

However, don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

INCORRECT: *The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.*

CORRECT: *She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct, because it is an example of extreme contrast.)*

Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).

Having finished the test, he left the room.

To get a seat, you'd better come early.

After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.

Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include yes, however, well.

Well, perhaps he meant no harm.

Yes, the package should arrive tomorrow morning.

However, you may not be satisfied with the results.

4. Comma Pairs

As mentioned before, commas usually separate information that does not serve as a necessity to the composition of the sentence or clause. This is the same rule when it comes to using comma pairs. Comma pairs often appear in the middle of a sentence to present contextual information about the subject of the clause.

Example: Hannah and Jacob, her friend from back home, went to the mall that weekend.

A way to determine if your usage of a comma pair is correct is to remove the information that is between the two commas. If the sentence still flows coherently, you have used the commas correctly. Use these three measures, provided by Purdue OWL, to verify if your comma usage is valid:

- If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense?
- Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?

5. Coordinate vs. Non-coordinate Adjectives

According to Purdue OWL, coordinate adjectives are adjectives with equal ("co-ordinate") status in describing the noun; neither adjective is subordinate to the other. You can decide if two adjectives in a row are coordinate by asking the following questions:

- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written in reverse order?
- Does the sentence make sense if the adjectives are written with *and* between them?

If you answer yes to these questions, then the adjectives are coordinate and should be separated by a comma. Here are some examples of coordinate and non-coordinate adjectives:

He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)

They lived in a white frame house. (non-coordinate)

She often wore a gray wool shawl. (non-coordinate)

Your cousin has an easy, happy smile. (coordinate)

The 1) relentless, 2) powerful 3) summer sun beat down on them. (1-2 are coordinate; 2-3 are non-coordinate.)

The 1) relentless, 2) powerful, 3) oppressive sun beat down on them. (Both 1-2 and 2-3 are coordinate.)

References

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