

COMMAS AND SEMICOLONS

The distinction between commas (,) and semicolons (;) can often be confusing, but deciding which to use is much easier if you keep in mind a few simple rules.

Here are some examples of common situations that require commas.

1. Introductions

Commas should be placed after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause. Words that usually introduce introductory clauses include after, although, as, because, if, since, when, and while. Well, yes, and however are also introductory words.

Examples: **When the rain stops**, I will go outside.

Because my alarm did not go off, I was late for my appointment.

However, my boss did not care that I was late.

2. Additional Information

Use two commas in the middle of a sentence to surround clauses, phrases, and words that aren't essential to the sentence. To test whether a part of the sentence is essential, try leaving out the section and seeing if the sentence still makes sense. Let's look at the example below to see how this works.

Inessential Information Example: My birthday, which happens to be next week, is sure to be a fun day.

If we take out "which happens to be next week," the sentence becomes "My birthday is sure to be a fun day." This sentence makes sense and isn't any less clear, so you know that the information is inessential and therefore should be set apart by commas.

Essential Information Example: The man serving the food to us gave me too much chili.

If we take out "serving the food to us," the sentence becomes "The man gave me too much chili." The reader does not know who the man is or the context of the sentence. Thus, this sentence loses clarity when the comma section is taken out; therefore, the information "serving the food to us" is essential and you cannot put commas around it.

3. Quotations

Use a comma to indicate a quotation. Remember that punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.

Example: "Go away," she said, "and never come back."

4. "Equal" Adjectives

Use commas to separate two or more "equal" adjectives that describe the same noun. Equal adjectives are adjectives that are not subordinate to the other. To test whether the adjectives are equal, see if the adjectives can be written in reverse or can be written with "and" between them. If it "sounds right" to reverse the order of the adjectives or to put the word "and" between them, then use a comma.

Examples of Equal Adjectives: He was a strange, eccentric kid.
My sister is a mean, bitter girl.

Examples of Unequal Adjectives: She wore a green chiffon top.
I live in an old white house.

5. Items in a Series

Three or more items in a series can be separated using commas.

Examples: I like to eat apples, oranges, and blueberries.
For my New Year's Resolution I hope to lose weight, make new friends, and get a job.
My sister doesn't have enough money to afford tickets to the concert, traveling costs, and band merchandise.

6. Separating Two Independent Clauses with FANBOYS

Referred to as coordinating conjunctions, the "FANBOYS" are used to separate independent clauses and need commas before them.

Examples: My dog hates cats, **but** cats like my dog.
She explained the topic to me, **yet** I still wasn't able to understand her.
My friends decided to come over, **so** I had to clean the house.

Special Cases: When to Use a Semicolon Instead of a Comma

1. Items in a Series using Semicolons

Sometimes you will have items in a series that already contain commas and wish to list them in a series as well. When this occurs, you can use semicolons to separate the items.

Examples:

I have visited California, Oregon, and Washington on the West Coast; Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana in the South; and Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire in the North.
Do you want spring rolls or nachos for an appetizer; chicken, beef, or fish for the entrée; and strawberry shortcake, chocolate mousse, or Boston cream pie for dessert?

2. Connecting Independent Clauses with Semicolons

No connecting words: You can use a semicolon to link two independent clauses without also using a connecting word (like the FANBOYS presented above).

Examples: It rained this afternoon; I went swimming anyway.
We always avoid big interstate highways when we take long road trips; the ride is usually more scenic on back roads.
Linda can't take the elevator; she's afraid of enclosed spaces.

Conjunctive Adverbs: You can use a semicolon to link two independent clauses with a following conjunctive adverb (adverbs that are used to join independent clauses, such as

however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc). Place the semicolon right before the conjunctive adverb and a comma right after it.

Examples: The highway traffic was horrible this morning; **however**, I was able to get to my meeting on time.

The food tasted awful; **therefore**, I sent it back to the chef.

I shrunk that shirt in the wash; **otherwise**, I would have worn it to the event today.

Additional Resources

See related handouts: “Sentence Boundaries, Sentence Fragments, and Run-On Sentences” and “Sentence Boundaries, Commas, and Semicolons Practice Worksheet”

Sentence Boundaries: http://www.fandm.edu/uploads/media_items/sentence-boundaries.original.pdf

Commas: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/01/>

Semicolons: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>

Works Cited

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