

# Commas

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# Commas

- ▶ Commas are often essential to meaning:
  - He shot himself as a child.
  - He shot, himself, as a child.
  - No dogs please.
  - No dogs, please.

# Commas

- ▶ This presentation explains 8 rules for how to use commas (and how NOT to use commas).

1. Use commas for joining two complete sentences containing *and, or, but, while, yet, not, and so*.

- ▶ John ate cake, but he would have preferred pie.
- ▶ Yesterday was her brother's birthday, so she took him out to dinner.

1 b. Do NOT use a comma when joining two complete sentences containing *however*, *nonetheless*, *therefore*, and *consequently*.

INCORRECT: John ate cake, however, he would have preferred the pie.

Use a semi-colon instead:

CORRECT: John ate cake; however, he would have preferred the pie.

## 2. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

- ▶ Central tendency can be measured with the mean, median, or mode.
- ▶ Calculate the squared deviation scores, add them up, and then divide by the sample size.

## 2. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

- ▶ The Oxford comma sometimes helps clarify meaning.
  - CONFUSING: I went to the chemist, Marks & Spencer and the florist.
  - BETTER: I went to the chemist, Marks & Spencer, and the florist.
  - CONFUSING: The driver stayed conscious, escaped from the car before it sank and swam to the river-bank. (this implies the vehicle swam to the river-bank).
  - BETTER: The driver stayed conscious, escaped from the car before it sank, and swam to the river-bank.

## 2b. Don't use a comma between two nouns in a compound noun.

**INCORRECT:** The participants who had been administered the placebo, and the participants who received the active drug completed the same questionnaires.

**CORRECT:** The participants who had been administered the placebo and the participants who received the active drug completed the same questionnaires.

## 2c. Don't put a comma between two verbs in a compound verb or a compound predicate.

- ▶ **INCORRECT:** The participants completed the consent form, and filled out the first questionnaire.
- ▶ **CORRECT:** The participants completed the consent form and filled out the first questionnaire.
  
- ▶ **INCORRECT:** The IRB said that I needed to change the email address on the consent form, and that I should send them the recruitment materials.
- ▶ **CORRECT:** The IRB said that I needed to change the email address on the consent form and that I should send them the recruitment materials.

### 3. Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, and words.

Common starter words include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while, to, however, yes, and no.*

- ▶ **If the sample sizes are unequal,** compare the variances to each other.
- ▶ **To calculate the variance,** first calculate the deviation scores.
- ▶ **However,** Harvey (209) found the opposite.

**3b. If the clause is moved to the end of the sentence, do NOT put a comma before it.**

**INCORRECT:** Compare the variances to each other, if the sample sizes are equal.

**CORRECT:** Compare the variances to each other if the sample sizes are equal.

## 3c. Don't put a comma between the subject and verb.

- ▶ INCORRECT: The combination of talkativeness and gregariousness, leads to higher sales.
- ▶ CORRECT: The combination of talkativeness and gregariousness leads to higher sales.

4. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off **non-essential** information.

Information is **non-essential** if it could be deleted or moved and the sentence would still make sense.

## 4. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off non-essential information.

- ▶ Theory and practice, however, do not always agree.
- ▶ The proof, which was long, was given in an appendix.
- ▶ Tenure-track faculty, who need to publish, are tempted to engage in p-hacking.

4b. Alternatively, you can use dashes or parentheses to set off non-essential material.

- ▶ Coefficient alpha - often called Cronbach's alpha after its inventor - is the most commonly used measure of internal consistency.

# Dashes and parentheses can be helpful in resolving comma wars.

- ▶ However, the last assumption (**normality**), contrary to popular opinion, is not strictly necessary.
- ▶ These assumptions (**independence, normality, and homoscedasticity**) are often violated.
- ▶ Tests on means – **t-tests, ANOVA, MANOVA, and the like** – can be reframed as part of the general linear model.

4c. Do NOT use comma to set off **essential** elements of a sentence, such as clauses that begin with the word *that*.

- ▶ The proof **that coefficient alpha equals KR-20** was given in the appendix.
- ▶ Researchers **who engage in p-hacking** make conclusions that cannot be replicated.

## 5. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun.

- ▶ The participants focused on a small, red square. (coordinate)
- ▶ She embarked on a long, tedious proof. (coordinate)
- ▶ Extraversion and openness have a small positive correlation. (non-coordinate)
- ▶ It was an endangered white rhino. (non-coordinate)

**5b. Do not use a comma to separate an adverb from the adjective it modifies.**

**INCORRECT:** We found a statistically, significant correlation.

**CORRECT:** We found a statistically significant correlation.

## 6. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer to the beginning of the sentence.

These phrases are *free modifiers* that can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusion. If moving the phrase causes confusion, then it is not free and must remain bound to the word it modifies.

## 6. Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer to the beginning of the sentence.

- ▶ CORRECT: Nancy waved at the docking ship, laughing joyously.
- ▶ INCORRECT: Lisa waved at Nancy, laughing joyously. (who is laughing?)
- ▶ CORRECT: Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy.
- ▶ CORRECT: Lisa waved at Nancy, who was laughing joyously.

## 7. Use commas to set off geographical names, addresses, and items in dates (unless the date is just the month and year).

- ▶ Las Vegas, Nevada, is in the southwest.
- ▶ The defense will be held May 3, 2014.
- ▶ Send the package to 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV.
- ▶ I began my thesis in earnest in July 2014.  
(no comma is needed for just the year and month)

## 8. Use commas before quotations or direct speech.

- ▶ John said, “Are you going now?”
- ▶ Staves (1994) claimed, “Men obtained higher emotional intelligence on 4 of the 10 scales” (p . 44.)

# References

Truss, L. (2003). *Eat, shoots and leaves: A zero tolerance approach to punctuation*. New York: Gotham Books.

The Writing Lab & The OWL at Purdue and Purdue University. (1995–2014). *Extended rules for using commas*. Available at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>