

Avoiding Comma Collisions

A good writer is like a traffic cop, controlling the flow of information, dividing up phrases and clauses into manageable chunks so that critical pieces of information don't crash into each other and leave a mangled heap of incomprehensibility in the middle of your sentence.

A good traffic cop knows the rules. Many people decide where to place commas according to the "feel" of the sentence. This is like a cop controlling traffic based upon sound of approaching vehicles--bad idea.



There are many rules for commas, but there are many rules for driving as well. Once you know them well, you don't think about the rules for driving. Once you know (and love) the comma rules, writing clean prose will become second nature. But we're going to simplify all these rules into two main categories: separating stuff and dividing essential from non-essential information.

Category 1 - Separating stuff

Compound Sentences & Comma Splices - Commas separate two independent clauses (i.e. sentences) BUT only when there is a conjunction joining them together.

Ex: Matt went out to ride his skateboard, but his students had cut it into very small pieces.
(notice that the clauses on either side of the comma could stand independently as separate sentences)

Ex: Marcus went looking for a dog, Crystal let him borrow her greyhound instead.
(WRONG - This is the dreaded **comma splice**, a noxious affront to intelligent writing. The clauses on either side of the comma could stand independently as separate sentences, BUT there is no conjunction--For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So--FANBOYS. Notice how this last sentence has a comma before the conjunction BUT.)

Ex: Heerschap started down the mountain, and caused an avalanche that swept Kyle and Hannah into the river **(WRONG)**
(This is wrong because the phrase that begins "caused an avalanche..." lacks a subject and cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence)

Series of Things - Commas separate three or more things listed in a series.

Ex: Last month, Hannah rode her mountain bike, corrected math homework, and had lunch with Stephen Hawking all in the same day.

Equal Adjectives - Commas separate two or more adjectives that have equal importance in describing a noun. If you can change the order of the adjectives or add "and" between them and have the sentence make sense, use the comma.

Ex: Kyle, the demanding, mysterious math teacher, does statistics for the CIA on the side.

Ex: Heerschap loaded the small, sniveling student into his special, Medieval trebuchet and launched him across the highway. (One of these commas is incorrect. Which one is it?)

Category II - Dividing Essential Stuff from Non-Essential Stuff

Some parts of a sentence, such as a subject and verb, are essential to make it sentence. Other phrases and clauses introduce or clarify what the writer is saying, but if they weren't there, the sentence would still make sense. For example, the phrase "*such as a subject and verb*" above is not essential and needs a comma. "*For example,*" in the last sentence introduces the sentence but isn't necessary for the sentence to live a happy and satisfying life.

You use a comma to divide the essential stuff from the non-essential stuff. Words that often introduce non-essential stuff include if, while, as, since, before, after, whether, unless, although, though, until, when, once, and because. Here's the most common non-essential stuff you set off with commas

Introductory phrases and clauses - You put a comma after an introductory phrase or clause that starts a sentence.

Ex: Before Matt graded his students' tests, he played tiddlywinks with his daughter.

Ex: If Marcus went skate skiing everyday he could qualify for the Olympic team. (WRONG in style and content--you always put commas after "If statements...")

(Note that when these phrases happen at the end of a sentence you don't use commas because at that point it's clear that they're meant to modify what's come before. The only exception is when there is an extreme contrast.)

Ex: Heerschap drank the sulfuric acid, although he knew it wouldn't go well with dessert.

Some ending phrases that add information - Ending phrases that limit or define the nouns they modify, *don't* get commas. They're essential. But information added for embellishment is non-essential and needs the comma.

Ex: Hannah easily solved the equation appearing on the board from Kyle's marker.
(No comma because "appearing on the board..." defines the equation)

Ex: Crystal used her Spanish to explain how to defuse the bomb, forgetting that the bomb technician only spoke Portuguese. (Note how the phrase "forgetting that..." could start the sentence and it would still make sense. This makes it non-essential.)

Phrases and clauses in the middle of sentences - You use commas to set of information that, while adding value to the sentence, is not essential to its meaning.

Ex: Crystal, who says Halloween is her favorite holiday, told Matt her preferred nickname is "The Slim Reaper."

Ex: Hannah, who teaches at the school, is an awesome frisbee player.
(Whether to put commas here depends on the context. If you were talking about several Hannahs and wanted to specify "the Hannah who works at the school" this would be essential information and you wouldn't use commas.)

Phrases that begin with "that" almost always indicates essential information. "Which" almost always indicates "non-essential" information. "Who" can go either way.

Transitional, parenthetical, or contrasting expressions - These expressions are about style, not substance. They are non-essential and need commas.

Ex: Kyle, therefore, had no choice but to impale the intruder with his protractor.

There are other places you use commas: to set off dates, to transition into quotations, etc. But these are probably already hard-wired into your brain. The rules above take a bit more effort. Use the examples above to fill in the attached worksheet and turn in for some pass fail points.

Comma Collision Worksheet

1. Create a sentence that uses a comma incorrectly as part of a compound sentence. The sentence must mention at least one of the senior faculty, zombies, and spinach.

Explain why this sentence is wrong.

Re-write the sentence correctly by adding punctuation or specific words.

2. Create a sentence that contains non-essential information but leave out the commas. The sentence must mention at least one of the senior faculty, an extreme sport, and some sort of natural disaster.

Explain why this sentence is wrong.

Re-write the sentence correctly by adding punctuation or specific words.

3. Now cut and paste a paragraph from your senior project paper that has at least five commas, but leave them all out. Exchange computers with the person next to you. Add commas to each other's paragraph. Share how you punctuated each other's paragraph.