

P1-k Add a comma if needed for clarity when a word is omitted, is repeated twice, or might be grouped incorrectly with the next words.

Such instances are rare. Check the guidelines in P1 and P2 so that you do not add unnecessary or incorrect commas.

- ▶ The statistics reveal that in 1997, 648,000 Hispanic students (48 percent of all Hispanic students) were enrolled in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

P2 Unnecessary Commas

For practice, go to bedfordstmartins.com/theguide/uncom

Because commas are warranted in so many instances, it is easy to use them unnecessarily or incorrectly, particularly with compound sentence elements, with restrictive elements, and between verbs and subjects or verbs and objects.

coordinating conjunction A word that joins comparable and equally important sentence elements: *for, and, or, but, nor, yet, or so*.

independent (main) clause A word group with a subject and a predicate that can stand alone as a separate sentence.

compound predicate Two or more verbs or verb phrases linked by *and*.

compound object Two or more words acting as an object and linked by *and*.

compound subject Two or more words acting as a subject and linked by *and*.

P2-a Omit the comma when items in a pair joined by *and* or another coordinating conjunction are not independent clauses.

Many word pairs can be joined by *and* or another coordinating conjunction, including **compound predicates**, **compound objects**, and **compound subjects**. None of these pairs should be interrupted by a comma.

COMPOUND PREDICATE *I grabbed my lunchbox and headed out to the tree.*

COMPOUND OBJECT *As for me, I wore a pink short set with ruffles and a pair of sneakers.*

COMPOUND SUBJECT *My father and brother wore big hiking boots.*

Two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction require a comma (see P1-a). The comma shows the reader where one independent clause ends and the other begins. Using a comma in other situations thus sends the wrong signal.

- ▶ According to Ward, many Custer fans believe that Custer was a “hero,” and “represents certain endangered manly virtues.”
- ▶ The school district could implement more programs at both the junior high and the high school, and thus could offer the students more opportunities.
- ▶ I was running out of time, and patience.

- ▶ Culture is not what we do, but how we do things, and why we do them in a particular way.

P2-b Omit any comma that sets off a restrictive word group.

Use commas to set off a nonrestrictive word group but not a restrictive word group. A *restrictive word group* distinguishes the noun it modifies from similar nouns or precisely defines its distinguishing characteristics. A *nonrestrictive word group* provides extra or nonessential information.

RESTRICTIVE She demonstrates this shortcoming in her story “*Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?*”

NONRESTRICTIVE The supercomputer center, *which I had seen hundreds of times*, still held many mysteries for me.

The context helps to determine which information is necessary and which is extra. In the first example, “*Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?*” identifies a specific story, distinguishing it from other stories by the same writer. In the second, *which I had seen hundreds of times* adds supplementary information, but the reference to the mysteries of the supercomputer center would be the same without this addition.

A comma signals that a word group is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. If a comma incorrectly sets off a restrictive word group, it undermines the meaning, suggesting to the reader that essential information is not important. See also P1-c.

- ▶ The ten people from the community would consist of three retired people, over the age of sixty, three middle-aged people, between the ages of twenty-five and sixty, and four teenagers.
- ▶ Although divorce is obviously a cause of the psychological problems, a child will face, the parents need to support their child through the anxiety and turmoil.

P2-c Omit any commas that unnecessarily separate the main elements of the sentence — subject and verb or verb and object.

Even in a complicated sentence, a reader expects the core elements — **subject**, **verb**, and **object** — to lead directly from one to the other. A comma that separates two of these elements confuses matters by suggesting that some other material has been added, such as an introductory or trailing element or a transitional or parenthetical expression.

subject The part of a clause that identifies who or what is being discussed.

verb A word or phrase that expresses action or being and, along with a subject, is a basic component of a sentence.

object The part of a clause that receives the action of the verb: At the checkpoint, we unloaded *the canoes*.

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adverbial clause A clause that nearly always modifies a verb, indicating time, place, condition, reason, cause, purpose, result, or another logical relationship.

noncoordinate adjectives Two or more adjectives that do not modify a noun equally. Instead, one or two of the adjectives closest to the noun form a noun phrase that the remaining adjectives modify: *colorful hot-air* balloons.

coordinate adjectives Two or more adjectives that modify a noun equally and independently: the *large, red* hat.

Delete a comma that unnecessarily separates a subject and its verb.

- ▶ *Bilateral,* means that both the left and the right sides of the brain are involved in processing a stimulus.
- ▶ This movie's only *fault,* is that it does not set a good example for younger children.

Delete a comma that unnecessarily separates a verb and its object.

- ▶ Now the voters must *decide,* the issue of term limits.
- ▶ Unlike Kaoma, many other groups or solo singers try without success to incorporate in their works, music from different cultures.

P2-d Omit a comma that separates the main part of the sentence from a trailing adverbial clause.

When an adverbial clause appears at the beginning of a sentence, it is usually set off by a comma because it is an introductory element. When the clause appears at the end of a sentence, however, a comma is ordinarily not needed.

When Pirates of the Caribbean finally reaches its climax, the ending is full of surprises.

Depp shows his charm *when Sparrow nearly seduces the governor's daughter.*

Omitting this unnecessary comma makes the sentence flow more smoothly.

- ▶ I found the tables *turned,* when he interviewed me about the reasons for my tattoo.

P2-e Leave out any comma that separates noncoordinate adjectives.

If you cannot rearrange the adjectives before a noun or add *and* between them, they are probably noncoordinate adjectives (sometimes called *cumulative adjectives*). Such adjectives are not equal elements; do not separate them with a comma. In contrast, **coordinate adjectives** should be separated by commas (see P1-i).

—COORDINATE ADJECTIVES—

Wearing a pair of jeans, *cutoff, bleached, and torn,* with an embroidered blouse

NONCOORDINATE ADJECTIVES

and *soft leather* sandals, she looked older and more foreign than Julie.

Leather modifies *sandals*, and *soft* modifies *leather sandals* as a unit. Thus the meaning is cumulative, and a comma would interrupt the connection between the adjectives and the noun.

- ▶ Huge, neighborhood parties could bring the people in our community together.

P2-f Omit any comma that appears before or after a series of items.

Although commas should be used to separate the items in a list, they should not be used before the first item or after the final one.

- ▶ Race, sex, religion, financial situation, or any other circumstance beyond the control of the applicant, should not be considered.

See also P1-e.

P2-g Omit or correct any other unnecessary or incorrect commas.

Check your essays carefully for the following typical comma problems.

Omit a comma that follows a coordinating conjunction.

A comma is needed *before* a coordinating conjunction if it links two independent clauses but not if it links a pair of other sentence elements. A comma is never needed *after* a coordinating conjunction, however. Be especially alert to this unnecessary comma when *but* or *yet* appears at the beginning of a sentence.

- ▶ But, since sharks are not yet classified as endangered species, the members of Congress were not very sympathetic, and the bill was not passed.

Note: A conjunction may or may not be needed for transition or dramatic effect, depending on the context of the sentence in your essay.

- ▶ ^{Since} But, since sharks are not yet classified as endangered species, the members of Congress were not very sympathetic, and the bill was not passed.

Omit a comma following a coordinating conjunction joining two independent clauses, even if the conjunction is followed by a transitional or introductory expression.

- ▶ The ominous vision of the piano wavered before my eyes, and, before I knew it, I was at the base of the steps to the stage, steps that led to potential public humiliation.

coordinating conjunction A word that joins comparable and equally important sentence elements: *for*, *and*, *or*, *but*, *nor*, *yet*, or *so*.

dependent (subordinate) clause A word group that has a subject, a predicate, and a subordinating word at the beginning; it cannot stand by itself as a sentence but must be connected to an independent (main) clause.

subordinating conjunction A word or phrase that introduces a dependent clause and relates it to an independent clause.

indirect quotation A reworded statement or question that presents a speaker's or writer's ideas without quoting directly or using quotation marks.

preposition A word (such as *between*, *in*, or *of*) that always appears as part of a phrase and indicates the relation between a word in a sentence and the object of the preposition: The water splashed *into* the canoe.

prepositional phrase A group of words that begins with a preposition and indicates the relation between a word in a sentence and the object following the preposition: Her sunglasses slid *under* the seat.

- ▶ I had finally felt the music deep in my soul, and, when I sang, I had a great feeling of relief knowing that everything was going to be all right.

Omit a comma after the word that introduces a dependent clause.

Watch for words such as *who*, *which*, *that*, *whom*, *whose*, *where*, *when*, *although*, *because*, *since*, *though*, and other **subordinating conjunctions**.

- ▶ This trend was evident as I entered a college where, the first-year enrollment had been rising.
- ▶ The drinking age should be raised because, drunk driving has become the leading cause of death among young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five.

Omit a comma preceding *that* when it introduces an indirect quotation.

Unlike a direct quotation, an indirect quotation is not set off by a comma or quotation marks.

- ▶ After looking at my tests, the doctor said, that I had calcification.

Omit a comma immediately following a preposition.

A comma may follow a complete **prepositional phrase** at the beginning of a sentence, but a comma should not follow the preposition or interrupt the phrase.

- ▶ Despite, multiple recruitment and retention problems, the number of public school teachers increased by 27 percent between 1986 and 1999.

Omit unnecessary commas that set off a prepositional phrase in the middle of a sentence.

When a prepositional phrase appears in the middle of a sentence or at the end, it is usually not set off by commas. When it acts as an introductory element, however, it is generally followed by a comma.

- ▶ "I've seen the devil b'fore," he grumbled, in a serious tone, with his blue eyes peering into mine.
- ▶ The children's trauma team gathers in the Resuscitation Room, at the same time that John Doe is being treated.

Rewrite a sentence that is full of phrases and commas to simplify both the sentence structure and the punctuation.

- ~~The researchers could monitor, by~~ ^{By} ~~looking through a porthole window, how~~ ^{the researchers could monitor}
~~much time was spent, by Noah,~~ ^{Noah spent} in the dome.

P3 Semicolons

For practice, go to bedfordstmartins.com/theguide/semi

Use semicolons to join closely related independent clauses and to make long sentences with commas easier to read.

P3-a Use a semicolon to join independent clauses if the second clause restates or sets up a contrast to the first.

In fact, she always had been special; we just never noticed.

Although two independent clauses could be separated by a period, the semicolon tells the reader that they are closely related, emphasizing the restatement or sharpening the contrast.

- Davie was not an angel; he was always getting into trouble with the teachers.

Note: When the independent clauses are linked by *and*, *but*, or another coordinating conjunction, use a comma rather than a semicolon (see P1-a) unless the independent clauses include internal punctuation (see P3-c).

P3-b Use semicolons to separate items in a series when they include internal commas.

Studies of gender differences in conversational interaction include an Elizabeth Aries article titled “Interaction Patterns and Themes of Male, Female, and Mixed Groups,” a study conducted in a research laboratory setting; a Pamela Fishman article titled “Interaction: The Work Women Do,” a study researched by naturalistic observation; and an article by Candace West and Don Zimmerman titled “Small Insults: A Study of Interruptions in Cross-Sex Conversation between Unacquainted Persons,” a study conducted in a research laboratory setting.

Because the reader expects items in a series to be separated with commas, other commas within items can be confusing. The solution is to leave the internal commas as they are but to use a stronger mark, the semicolon, to signal the divisions between items.

independent (main) clause A word group with a subject and a predicate that can stand alone as a separate sentence.