

The Writing Center @ KUMC

Commas¹

Commas confuse us because they have many uses. Here are some popular myths about comma usage:

- “Long sentences need a comma.”
- “You should add a comma wherever you pause.”
- “Commas are so mysterious that it’s impossible to figure out where they belong!”

Here are some tips and guidelines for most situations involving commas.

1. SETTING BOUNDARIES

Many words, phrases, or clauses need to be set off with a comma. Here are three examples:

- **Currently**, normal care is being offered to this population.
- Healthcare is full of leaders, **whether formal or informal**, who promote success.
- It was essential to follow procedure, **which was provided by the PI**.

In example 1, “currently” initiates the sentence, i.e., main subject and verb. In example 2, “whether formal or informal” provides *extra information* about “leaders” and constitutes a *relative clause*. If we removed the “whether” part, we need no commas because the “who” part defines “leaders.” Example 3 is similar, except the supplementary message comes at the end. Clearly, the comma sets boundaries.

2. FANBOYS

FANBOYS is a mnemonic device to recall the coordinating conjunctions *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*. These boys connect words, phrases, and clauses:

Words: I am almost *dressed* **and** *ready*.

Phrases: My socks are *in the living room* **or** *under my bed*.

Clauses: They smell really bad, *so they will be easy to find*.

A comma is needed before a **FANBOY** to link two independent clauses (i.e., two complete thoughts):

← complete thought → **FANBOY** ← complete thought →
You wore a lovely hat, but you didn't wear anything else.
My hamster loved to play, so I gave him a hula-hoop.

¹ Adapted from the University of North Carolina webpage (<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handout/commas>)

If the second clause isn't a complete thought, don't use a comma.


complete thought FANBOY not a complete thought
You wore a lovely hat but didn't wear anything else.
My hamster loved to play and often ate marshmallows.

To comma or not to comma. Read your words carefully before punctuating.

3. COMMA SPLICE

A lone comma is the same thing as a run-on (i.e., it splices/fuses together parts that should be separate). It drives some professors batty.

BAD: The arts and crafts movement began in the early 1920s, it still existed in the 1950s.

You can fix these comma splices simply: add **FANBOYS**, change comma to semicolon, make two separate sentences, or add a subordinator (e.g., *because, while, although, if, when, since*, etc.)

GOOD: The arts and crafts movement began in the early 1920s, and it still existed in the 1950s.

ALSO GOOD: The arts and crafts movement began in the early 1920s; it still existed in the 1950s.

STILL GOOD: The arts and crafts movement began in the early 1920s. It still existed in the 1950s.

4. SERIAL COMMA (aka Harvard or Oxford Comma)

Most writing styles require commas in a list, including one before the conjunction—usually *and* or *or*.

EITHER: Three cheers for the red, white and blue.

OR: Three cheers for the red, white, and blue.

BUT ALWAYS: A good student listens to his teachers without yawning, reads once in a while, and writes papers before they are due.

5. DESCRIBERS

If you have two or more adjectives (words that describe) that are *not* joined by a conjunction and both/all adjectives modify the same word, put a comma between them.

He was a bashful, dopey, sleepy dwarf.

The frothy, radiant princess kissed the putrid, vile frog.

These guidelines cover only the most common situations in writing. If you are worried about commas, pick up a copy of *Zen Comma* by David Bowman. It has many useful explanations and examples.

Be comma conscious and comma clever!