

COMMA USAGE

If none of the following rules apply to your situation, consult your instructor or your text. (Also notice how professional writers use commas; they will sometimes break rules for special reasons.)

1. Use commas to separate words, phrases, or clauses in a **list or series**. However, if all the items in the list are connected by “or,” “nor,” or “and,” then no commas are needed. For example:

A worthwhile philosophy includes honesty, industry, and kindness.
Ham and eggs, waffles and syrup, and cereal were served for breakfast.
Joe or Jane or Mary or Alice will certainly be there. He was strong and brave and good.

2. Use a comma to set off **introductory words, phrases, and clauses** from the sentence. (A comma is optional with a short phrase if the meaning is clear.) For example:

After the storm was over, we went home. (introductory adverb clause)
Having rung the bell loudly, the sentry fled. (introductory participial phrase)
In 1516, soldiers were hired as mercenaries. (introductory prepositional phrase)
In the room we found no signs of life. (introductory prepositional phrase--comma optional)
Yes, I will be there. (introductory word)

3. Use commas to set off **interrupting words, phrases, and clauses**. For example:

Jonathan will, in fact, serve on the committee. No one else I know, however, will volunteer.
Jane, who is my best friend, has asked me to be a bridesmaid.

4. Use a comma with a conjunction (and, but, or, so, for, yet) to make a **compound sentence**. For example:

She helped me with my homework, and then she stayed for dinner.
She helped me with my homework and then stayed for dinner. (not two sentences, so no comma)

5. Use commas to set off **appositives** (one-word appositives are often not set off). For example:

Mr. Jay, our coach, taught at Wilmont, a boy’s school. (two appositives)
The year 1812 found America in another war. (comma not needed)

6. Use commas in **addresses and dates**. For example:

Hal lives at 222 Joy Street, Dayton, Ohio 45402. He was born on December 22, 1967.
She was born in May 1984. (comma not needed without the day)

7. Use commas with **direct quotations**. For example:

“I have to study for the math test,” my sister complained. I responded, “Quit whining.”
“I wish,” commented Grace, “that you wouldn’t call me so early in the morning.”

8. Use commas with words of **direct address**. For example:

Mary, come over here. I wish, Mary, that you would come over later. Are you ready, Greg?

9. Use a comma to set off **contrasting expressions** or to show **emphasis**. For example:

The book was Frank’s, not Hal’s. That was a great meal, especially the dessert.