
Five Rules for Using Commas*

1. **FANBOYS. Put a comma before *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* when they connect two independent clauses.**

What is an independent clause?

It is a group of words with a subject (noun or pronoun), predicate (verb), and complete idea.

He cooked dinner.
I washed the dishes.

If you want to connect two independent clauses, insert a comma (it separates) and one of the coordinating conjunctions mentioned above (it joins).

He cooked dinner, **but** I washed the dishes.

Some examples to try:

- ☞ Light availability is an important factor in biologic communities most vegetative associations are layered.
- ☞ Cold-blooded animals become inactive in cold weather and hibernate to conserve energy.
- ☞ Shrubs are defined as woody plants with several stems trees are defined as having a single trunk.

2. **Put a comma between three or more items in a series.**

Biologic attributes that minimize heat loss are feathers, hair, and winter fat.

Note that there is a comma before *and*. This comma, when used before the word *and* or *or* for the final item in a list, is called the Oxford comma. Some books suggest the removal of the comma before *and* in some cases; however, you will always be correct if you include it.

In this example, the objects are “coordinate” and come from the same category (they are all physical features). Coordinate objects can be listed in any order, and be separated by “and” without changing the sentence.

Biologic attributes that minimize heat loss are hair, winter fat, and feathers.
(... hair *and* winter fat *and* feathers)

* Adapted from *The Least you Should Know About English* by Teresa Ferster Glazier

This comma rule works for most situations, but there are some words (usually adjectives) that “go together” and don’t need a comma between them even if they are in a series.

He wore old blue denim pants.

In this example, the adjectives are “cumulative”, or coming from different categories. “Old” denotes the age, “blue” denotes the colour, and “denim” denotes the material. Cumulative adjectives follow a distinct order (see the “basic grammar” handout), but do not need to be separated by commas. You can tell if the adjectives are cumulative when the sentence does not work if you replace the commas with “and” (He wore old *and* blue *and* denim pants), or change the order of the adjectives (“He wore denim blue old pants”).

Some examples to try:

- ☞ The human degradation is also evident in the substandard housing lack of jobs poor or no health care noise pollution congestion and lack of social services.
- ☞ The polar bears live in an environment consisting of barren hunting grounds.
- ☞ Cities with comfortable healthful environmentally safe human habitats are a requirement for 21st century sustainable living.

3. Put a comma after an introductory expression that is not essential to the sentence’s grammatical meaning (as an independent clause).

In 1992, 35 million couples in the United States used some form of birth control.
Of the 192 cities surveyed, the 22 cities that score the highest marks are scattered.

Words such as *although*, *because*, *even though* or *of* may indicate an introductory expression.

Some books suggest that an introductory expression containing three words or fewer does not need commas. It is the best policy, however, to consistently place commas after any introductory expression.

Some examples to try:

- ☞ Thus data for the urban resources planner are available in a variety of formats.
- ☞ As the plants resume activity after winter dormancy water travels through the living tissue.
- ☞ Although “pharmaceutical care” is great in theory many pharmacists who are used to simply dispensing medications have significant difficulty learning to monitor patients and consult with physicians.
- ☞ However many rural residents are employed in agriculture, forestry or other natural-resource-based jobs.

4. Put a comma before an afterthought that is not essential to the sentence's grammatical meaning (as an independent clause).

Scientists are still calling her Eve, unfortunately.

An example to try:

☞ Given this new information global warming is already happening isn't it?

5. Put commas around nonessential expressions, words, and dependent clauses that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

Words such as *however, moreover, finally, therefore, of course, by the way, on the other hand, I am sure, I think, or someone's name* are usually not essential to the grammatical meaning of sentences; these phrases are "extra" information that has been added to the independent clause.

Vegetation responds, therefore, to changes in parent material.
Population rate decreases are, of course, correlated with diseases.
I would love to come, Michelle, but I am very busy.

Miriam Tilden, who heads the hospital volunteers, will speak tonight.

To decide if part of the sentence is nonessential it is good to ask, "Interesting, but is it necessary?" The dependent clause *who heads the hospital volunteers* is not essential to the main idea of the sentence. In the following example, however, this dependent clause is essential to the main idea of the sentence.

Miriam Tilden is the woman who heads the hospital volunteers.

Some examples to try:

- ☞ The ten categories therefore are defined based on the highest values.
- ☞ The fertility rates finally increased enough to balance losses to disease.
- ☞ Planned growth is more desirable than uncontrolled growth; furthermore it is more profitable.
- ☞ When the man returned from space travel according to Einstein he would be younger than his twin.
- ☞ Most of the papers that were read today have been revised.

Answers

Section 1

- ☞ Light availability is an important factor in biologic communities, so most vegetative associations are layered.
- ☞ Cold-blooded animals become inactive in cold weather and hibernate to conserve energy. (no comma needed)
- ☞ Shrubs are defined as woody plants with several stems, but trees are defined as having a single trunk.

Section 2

- ☞ The human degradation is also evident in the substandard housing, lack of jobs, poor or no health care, noise pollution, congestion, and lack of social services.
- ☞ The polar bears live in an environment consisting of barren hunting grounds. (no commas needed)
- ☞ Cities with comfortable, healthful, environmentally safe human habitats are a requirement for 21st century sustainable living.

Section 3

- ☞ Thus, data for the urban resources planner are available in a variety of formats.
- ☞ As the plants resume activity after winter dormancy, water travels through the living tissue.
- ☞ Although “pharmaceutical care” is great in theory, many pharmacists who are used to simply dispensing medications have significant difficulty learning to monitor patients and consult with physicians.
- ☞ However, many rural residents are employed in agriculture, forestry, or other natural-resource-based jobs.

Section 4

- ☞ Given this new information, global warming is already happening, isn't it?

Section 5

- ☞ The ten categories, therefore, are defined based on the highest values.
- ☞ The fertility rates finally increased enough to balance losses to disease. (no commas needed)
- ☞ Planned growth is more desirable than uncontrolled growth; furthermore, it is more profitable.
- ☞ When the man returned from space travel, according to Einstein, he would be younger than his twin.
- ☞ Most of the papers that were read today have been revised. (no commas needed)