

Bracken Business Communications Clinic

QUICK AND DIRTY COMMA RULES

Commas are used for **two purposes**: to **separate** items in a series and to **set off** nonessential elements from the flow of the sentence.

Separation

1. **Three or more items in a series must be separated by commas.**

His company constructed houses, churches, and condominiums.

The postman walked down the street, stopped at Jane's house, and walked to her door.

2. **Two or more full sentences connected by conjunctions (and, but, for, nor, or, yet, so) must be separated by commas.**

Students love to write about personal experiences, but they hate to write research papers. (Comma—two full sentences.)

Students love to write instant messages but hate writing formal memos. (No comma—only one subject, not two full sentences.)

Setting Off

1. **Use commas after an introductory clause.**

Before we sign the contract, our lawyer must review it.

Established in the 1930s, the SEC regulates securities markets.

2. **Commas are required to set off nonessential information from the rest of the sentence.**

MSU, located in the Gallatin Valley of Montana, has a distinguished academic reputation.

Mary, president of the student advisory club, introduced the speaker.

Common Comma Misuse

1. **Do not use a comma to separate the subject and predicate in a sentence.**

Never: The distinguished professor of accounting, looked on as his student received the award.

2. **Do not use a comma to connect two complete sentences when there is no conjunction.**

Never: Please complete the writing assignment by Friday, I must have it corrected by Monday.

Correct: Please complete the assignment by Friday. I must have it corrected by Monday.

Editing Hint

Read the sentence out loud. Listen for the natural pauses—a comma is usually appropriate in those places.