

## The Valuable, Though Tiny, Comma

Commas act as road signs or a musical 'rest.' They let the reader know when to pause in a sentence, and they indicate important information and what is non-essential information.

### The Basics

- Do not put commas between the subject, verb, and object in a clause, as these are the main parts of a complete sentence.
- An inserted comma will result in an incomplete clause.

*Examples:*

- ✗ Comma between subject and verb: Mom, gave me a cookie.
- ✗ Comma between verb and indirect object: Mom gave, me a cookie.
- ✗ Comma between indirect and direct objects: Mom gave me, a cookie.
- ✓ No comma: Mom gave me a cookie.

### Conjunctive Adverbs or Introductory Phrases

- Conjunctive adverbs or introductory phrases (however, therefore, also, in conclusion, for example) should be followed by a comma.
- These words direct the reader to an important point, and a comma will force the reader to pause and notice the information.

*Examples:*

- ✓ Nonetheless, our date has been postponed.
- ✓ In other words, we will be going to the movies next weekend.

### Independent Clauses

- A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined by a comma.
- To fix a comma splice, use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (and, or, so, yet, but, for, nor) to separate the two independent clauses.

*Examples:*

- ✗ Comma splice: Den bought a new printer, she returned it yesterday.
- ✓ Coordinating conjunction: Den bought a new printer, but she returned it yesterday.
  - Another way to correct a comma splice is to insert a semicolon into the sentence in place of a comma.

Example:

- ✓ Semicolon: Den bought a new printer; she returned it yesterday.

### Non-restrictive clauses

- Non-restrictive means a clause that is not essential to the sentence; it is extra information.
- Use commas around the non-restrictive clause so that the reader can distinguish necessary information from non-essential information.

### *Examples:*

- ✗ I wanted to tell you that even though you are extremely messy you are still my favourite roommate.
- ✓ I wanted to tell you that, even though you are extremely messy, you are still my favourite roommate.

### **Items in a list**

- When there are three or more items in a list, place a comma after each item except for the last one.

### *Example:*

- ✓ Mars bars, granola bars, and fruit snacks are all peanut-free options for the kids' lunches.

### **Proper use of commas in quotations**

- Commas are used to isolate who is doing the speaking when there is a quotation.
- When the quotation is a complete sentence, and the attribution to the speaker follows the quotation, replace the period that would normally be at the end of the quotation with a comma.

### *Examples:*

- ✓ "When it comes to birthday cake," Sarah whispered, "I prefer chocolate."
- ✓ "Congratulations! You have completed the course," said the instructor.

### **Comma use with dates, titles, and addresses**

- Below are examples of the proper ways to use commas in daily situations.

### *Examples:*

- ✓ Today is Friday, December 21st, 2007, and we are celebrating the winter solstice!
- ✓ Sylvie Briggs, vice president for operations, announced her retirement today.
- ✓ Post House Residence is located at 41 George Street, Brantford, Ontario.

### **Common Errors**

- Do not use a comma before "because" if it follows an independent clause.
- Use a comma after long introductory modifiers (subordinate clauses at the beginning of the sentence).
- Use commas in "which" statements, but not in "that" statements.

### *Examples:*

- ✓ I fell down the stairs because I was trying to snowboard in the house.
- ✓ Because we stayed out late last night, Chanel slept through her alarm.
- ✓ We walked from Jenny's house, which is closer to the school.
- ✓ I saw three other girls wearing the same dress that I bought last weekend!

For more, detailed information on the proper use of commas, see *The Brief Penguin Handbook*.

### Reference

Faigley, L., Graves, R., & Graves, H. (2008). *The brief Penguin handbook* (Canadian ed.). Toronto: Pearson Longman.