

A User's Guide to Commas

Comma splices? Misplaced modifiers? Appositives? Sometimes it seems that the terminology about commas is more confusing than the commas themselves.

So ... what is a comma?

A comma is a visual representation of a logical separation of information. Generally, commas add information to a sentence, separating that “extra” stuff from the rest of the sentence.

Take a basic sentence like “The Avengers work hard to protect innocent citizens.”

It is logical, but it doesn't have very much information in it. Commas allow us to signal that we are adding extra information into a sentence, like this:

The Avengers, **a diverse and often comical group of superheroes**, work hard to protect innocent citizens.

Here are some of the most commonly misunderstood rules:

1. Use commas to separate **main clauses** (which can stand alone as complete sentences) joined by any of the **coordinating conjunctions**:

For	Thor often has a hard time adjusting to modern American culture, for he is from a different world.
And	Tony Stark creates cutting-edge technology, and Iron Man proves to be one of his most useful creations.
Nor	Hawkeye does not speak up much, nor does he share personal information with the others.
But	Dr. Bruce Banner speaks eloquently, but the Hulk often resorts to grunting and roaring.
Or	The Avengers will succeed together, or each superhero will fail alone.
Yet	The Avengers are extremely strong, yet they are not invincible.
So	People tend to be terrified of the Hulk, so Dr. Banner exercises great self-control.

2. Use a **pair of commas** to set off a **nonessential element** that occurs in the **middle of a sentence** or a **comma before a nonessential element at the end of a sentence**. A nonessential element is a piece of information that does not affect the meaning of a sentence:

Middle of sentence: The Avengers, **a diverse and often comical group of superheroes**, work hard to protect innocent citizens.

End of sentence: I enjoyed watching the adventures of The Avengers, **a diverse and often comical group of superheroes**.

3. “Use commas **after introductory clauses, phrases, or words** that come **before** the main clause” (Driscoll and Brizee). You may need to use a comma between clauses if a sentence **starts** with one of these words: *while, since, because, if, and until*. Transitional expressions also fall into this category. Consult the Writing Center’s “Transitions” handout or a writing handbook for a list of these words/phrases.

Because Loki will stop at nothing to gain control of Earth, the Avengers must defeat him.

4. Use commas to separate **three or more items listed** in a sentence:

Thor, Iron Man, Hawkeye, Black Widow, Captain America, and the Hulk make up the Avengers.

5. “Use commas to separate **two or more coordinate adjectives** that describe the same noun” (Driscoll and Brizee) when the word “**and**” can be logically inserted between them:

The Avengers is an **action-packed, engaging** film. (*The Avengers* is an **action-packed and engaging** film.)

6. “Use commas to set off all **geographical names, items in dates ... and addresses ...**, and **titles in names**” (Driscoll and Brizee):

On **May 4, 2012**, I saw *The Avengers* at the movie theater in **Toledo, Ohio**, with my friend Roger Benners, **MD**.

7. Use commas to separate a **direct quotation** from the rest of the sentence **when using a signal verb** like *asks, says, or replies*:

Loki dismisses Captain America, calling him “The soldier. A man out of time.” Captain America wittily **replies, “I’m not the one who’s out of time.”**

8. “Use commas whenever necessary to **prevent possible confusion** or misreading” (Driscoll and Brizee):

When Stark goes out to **eat, his friends** join him. vs. When Stark goes out to **eat his friends** join him. (Stark wants to eat shawarma, not his friends.)

9. Use commas **before, after, or surrounding** the **name or title of a person being directly addressed**, depending on where the name/title is positioned in the sentence:

End of sentence: How do you control your temper, **Dr. Banner**?
Beginning of sentence: **Dr. Banner**, how do you control your temper?
Middle of sentence: How, **Dr. Banner**, do you control your temper?

10. Use a comma to separate a **statement from a question**:

Agent Natasha Romanoff cleverly outmaneuvered Loki when it came to mind games, **didn't she?**

11. Use a comma to separate **contrasting parts of a sentence**:

The Avengers believe technology should be used for good, **not** evil.

12. Use commas **to surround words such as “therefore” and “however”** when they are **used as interrupters**:

Loki, **however**, has no problem using the Tesseract for his own destructive purposes.

Work Cited

Driscoll, Dana, and Allen Brizee. “Extended Rules for Using Commas.” *The Purdue OWL*. Purdue U Writing Lab, 3 April 2013. Web. 18 June 2015.