

## The Comma: A Technical Description of a Humble—but Crucial—Little Mark

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Whether you use heavy punctuation or light, punctuation is *important*. For example, try adding or removing commas from lines like this: “What is this thing called, love?” or “He shot, himself, as a child” (cit. in Truss, 2003, 82).

In what follows, a set of main rules regarding when commas must be used is given. The list is not exhaustive; *Fowler’s Pocket Usage*, for example, offers eight comma rules, while the *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* offers nine. As for when not to use commas, well, that’s something you can learn more about from most any grammar book or writing manual. For now, let’s just focus on how to use commas *correctly*. The rules given here are adapted from *Keys for Writers: First Canadian Edition*, eds. A. Raimes and S. Norton (1998, p. 325).

Use a comma:

*Between* two complete clauses separated by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*).

- He chuckled and giggled, but she frowned and glowered.

*After* a phrase or dependent clause occurring before the subject and the independent clause.

- On our way to the party, we stopped to get gas.

*Around* nonrestrictive information inserted in a sentence.

- Lori-Ann Muenzer, who won an Olympic gold medal in cycling, announced yesterday that she would be taking a year off. (The information enclosed by the commas is called “nonrestrictive” because it could be left out and there would still be a complete sentence—“Lori-Ann Muenzer announced yesterday that she would be taking a year off.”)

*Between* three or more items in a series.

- Sally ordered soup, a donut, a chocolate bar, and a coffee.

*Between* an introductory verb and a quotation.

- She said, “I can’t believe I won the lottery!”

Hopefully, these basic rules will help you to use this important little mark. If you are unsure as to the meaning of words such as “phrase,” or “clause,” or “dependent,” and so forth, *use* a dictionary or grammar manual or writing text to help you out--every technical word that is used to offer “how-to” rules on punctuation is usually defined in such books (*hint*: use the index at the back of the book).

## References

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