Comma rules

How to know when you need a comma and when you don’t

# To separate words or word groups in series of three or more items

✔          We need oatmeal, nuts, and raisins.

✘          We need oatmeal nuts and raisins.

✔          I had milk and cereal.

✘          I had milk, and cereal. (only two items, so no comma needed)

# To separate two interchangeable adjectives that describe the same noun

✔          Look at that tall, strongtree.

✔          Look at that strong, talltree.

✔          What a beautiful summer day! (These adjectives are not interchangeable)

# Between two independent clauses that are separated by a coordinating conjunction (“fanboys”)

✔        He goes home every day after school**,** *and* he watches his favorite TV shows.

✘        He goes home every day, and eats mac and cheese. (no independent clause after the conjunction, so comma inserted is an error)

# To set off nonessential or introductory words or phrase in a sentence

✔        I am, of course, very excited.

✔        Because of the rain*,* we stayed inside all day.

✔        Jason, my brother, walked in the room.

✔        First, I will recite a poem.

# To set off a noun of direct address

✔        It’s nice to see you, old friend.

✔        Hello, Charles, how are you today?

# To separate the month and day from the year in a sentence

✘        They met in February, 2001. (There is no day in this date, so adding a comma is an error.)

✔        On July 10, 1993, you were born.

✔        They met February 14, 2001.

✔        I haven’t read that book since January 2006. (no day indicated, so no comma needed)

# To set off the state from the city in a sentence

✔        In Dayton, Ohio, I fell in love. (There is a comma on both sides of the state when the sentence continues.)

✔        I live in Seattle, Washington.

# To set off a dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence

✔        When I celebrate my birthday, it is essential that I have cake.

✘        It is essential that I have cake, when I celebrate my birthday. (No comma is needed when the dependent clause is at the end of the sentence, so comma is an error.)

# To introduce or interrupt direct quotations with a speaker tag

✔          “Michael,” she asked*,* “can I eat this?” (Notice that a comma is used at the beginning of the interruption and inside the quotation mark, as well as after the speaker tag.)

✔          Lisa said, “Whatever.” (In this case the comma is placed directly after the speaker tag.)

# To end a quotation that comes before “he/she/they said”

✔          “I know this is important,” Jane said.

✔          “Stop,” he said.

# To separate contrasting parts of a sentence

✔          This is my chocolate, not yours.

✔          The two of you are friends, aren’t you?

# Before and after introductory terms when they are followed by a series

✔          You need to bring supplies, for instance, pencils, paper, and erasers.

✘          Judy brought some stuff, napkins, plates, and forks. (An introductory word/phrase is needed here.)

# Before and after “etc.” if it’s in the middle of a sentence

✔          Pots, pans, whisks, etc., are in the cabinet.

# Never between a subject and a verb

✔          The weather this May has been very strange.

✘          The weather this May, has been very strange.