



KEISER UNIVERSITY



## Graduate Online Writing Studio

### Comma Rules

Since commas are the most common punctuation and have many rules governing their usage, they are potentially the greatest source of errors in academic writing. The most common comma mistakes can be avoided if you know the difference between an independent clause and a dependent clause.

A clause is a group of words with at least one subject and verb pairing. An independent clause has the subject-verb pairing and forms a complete thought. Nothing needs to be added to it. It is a complete sentence. A dependent clause has a subject-verb pairing but is an incomplete thought. The following examples will explain how this distinction affects comma usage.

### Compound Sentences: Coordinating Conjunctions

Compound sentences are two complete sentences (independent clause) joined together with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (**for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**). (The first letters of these coordinating conjunctions form the word “fanboys” as a memory aid.) These conjunctions are fundamentally different from other conjunctions. If you think of them as the glue that binds two sentences together rather than being a part of either sentence, it makes their unique nature easier to understand.

The following are examples of two sentences (underscored) joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction:

Today is Friday, **and** we always eat lunch at Joe’s Diner on Friday.

Today is Friday, **but** we are going to eat lunch at Mel’s Café this week.

Today is Friday, **so** we are going to Joe’s Diner at noon.

We will eat at Joe’s Diner, **or** we will skip lunch today.

Notice that when you read each underlined part, it is a complete sentence. To join the two sentences together **both a comma and a coordinating conjunction are required**.

### Compound Verbs

Do not confuse a compound sentence with a sentence that has more than one verb (the subject is boldfaced; the verbs are underlined):

**We** settle all accounts and deliver the receipts to the bank on Friday.

All **accounts** are settled and closed by noon.

The **customer** opened the account and deposited assets in excess of \$30 million.

Notice that there is no comma in front of the conjunction when clauses are not being joined.

### Complex Sentences: Subordinating Conjunctions

Complex sentences occur with the joining of a complete sentence (independent clause) to a dependent clause. When you read the dependent clause, you will know it is unfinished—not a complete sentence. Examples of dependent clauses follow:

**If** I finish this assignment by Tuesday.

**Since** the assignment isn't due until Tuesday.

**Because** the directions were not clear.

**When** E.F. Hutton speaks.

Each of these dependent clauses starts with a subordinating conjunction (in boldface). The subordinating conjunction is the first word of the clause rather than the glue between clauses. As long as you read the subordinating conjunction as part of its clause, you will know that the clause is dependent. It is the order of the clauses (whether the dependent clause is before or after the independent clause) that determines the comma usage.

When the dependent clause precedes the independent clause, the dependent clause is followed by a comma:

**If** I finish this assignment by Tuesday, I will be ahead of schedule.

**Since** the assignment isn't due until Tuesday, I can help you with your analysis.

**Because** the directions were not clear, product safety became an issue.

**When** E.F. Hutton speaks, my broker calls me.

Think of the comma as a clue to the reader that the main sentence is starting. When the dependent clause follows the independent clause, no such clue is necessary, so there is no comma.

I will be ahead of schedule **if** I finish this assignment by Tuesday.

I can help you with your analysis **since** the assignment isn't due until Tuesday.

Product safety became an issue **because** the directions were not clear.

My broker calls me **when** E.F. Hutton speaks.

The following is a partial list of subordinating conjunctions:

after	once
although	only if
as	since
as soon as	since
because	so that/so
before	the first time
by the time	though
even if	unless
even though	until
every time	when
if	whenever
in case	whereas
in the event that	whether or not
just in case	while
now that	while

### **Adjective (Relative) Clauses: Restrictive vs. Non-restrictive**

Adjective clauses, like all clauses, have a subject-verb pairing. The subject is a relative pronoun (who, whom, which, that, whose). All you need to know is that adjective clauses occur right after the word they modify, and the clause either has commas around it (non-restrictive) or has no commas around it (restrictive). The examples below explain what all that means.

All of the students, **who completed the tutorial**, earned high grades. (All high grades)

All of the students **who completed the tutorial** earned high grades. (Some high grades)

The XYZ software, **which provides security**, costs \$24.95. (All XYZ software provides security)

The XYZ software **that provides security** costs \$24.95. (Some XYZ software provides security)

The first example (with commas) indicates that “students” is not being restricted to some subset of specific students. The commas indicate that the adjective clause does not change the basic meaning of the sentence: All students received high grades. The second sentence (without commas) restricts “students” to the specified subset: those who completed the tutorial only.

**In general commas surround things that do not substantially change the basic meaning of a sentence. (Examples follow)**

The first President of the United States, George Washington, lived in Virginia.

My greatest concern, whether it is justified or not, is attrition.

She decided, therefore, to continue the discussion,

They have, on the other hand, refused to consider the merits of the case.

### **Other Frequent Comma Errors**

The APA Manual requires that all series of three or more items have a comma before the “and” or “or” that precedes the final item in the series:

The branches of the government are the Legislative, the Executive, **and** the Judiciary.

You must summarize the research, compare it to other research, explain its methodology, **or** justify its inclusion in your study in this paragraph.

You must place a comma between and after the parts of a date and an address. Most people remember the “between” comma, but many omit the “after” one.

Japan, on December 7, 1941, attacked Pearl Harbor.

Our branch office at 123 Main Street, Chicago, Illinois, will be permanently closed.

Notice that without the “after” comma, we would have the following bizarre statements:

1941 attacked Pearl Harbor.

Illinois will be permanently closed.