



# Comma Chameleon

Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning at UIS



The tendency among professional writers is to use fewer commas. This is especially noticeable in the trend away from setting off certain kinds of modifying phrases: “We know that, in the individual man, consciousness grows” (Huxley). The tendency today would be not to set off *in the individual man*—but to do so would not be wrong. Writer Frederick Crews says that a writer’s use of commas says something about his or her style: “One writer, by using commas only where necessary, presents himself as someone who cuts through formalities and wastes no time. Another, by using commas more often, tells his reader that he cares about fine distinctions and complex relationships.” Two writers might punctuate the same sentence quite differently—and both be equally “correct.” Rules, then, are helpful guides, but they don’t solve all the predicaments that writers get themselves into. Above all, in using commas common sense should prevail; punctuating for meaning should take precedence over punctuating for correctness. In the rules that follow we note situations where you have comma options and try to alert you to some of the commonest errors.

## Comma Usage

### ♣ *To Separate Three or More Items in a Series:*

- Anna, Maurice, and I...
- They came late to the party, threw their coats on the bed, and dashed toward the food.
- The field was wet, muddy, and slippery.

**Note:** The comma before the final *and* of a series may be omitted if the sentence will not be misunderstood without the comma. For example, in “The cats had brown, green, gray and blue eyes” it’s not clear whether we’re talking about three or four colors.

### ♣ *To Separate Two Independent Clauses Joined by and, but, or, for, so, nor, or yet:*

- I love going to plays, but I can’t afford them.
- My history books cost twenty dollars, and my mathematics text costs twelve.
- If the clauses are short and closely related, you may omit the comma.
- Commas after conjunctions are sometimes used, but are superfluous:
  - “So, I took him up on his idea”
  - “But, we failed to understand.”
- Don’t use a comma between compound verbs:
  - Many college students work and also have tuition scholarships.

### ♣ *To Set Off Words, Clauses, or Phrases That Interrupt a Sentence (non-essential)*

- You will find, however, that the water is cool.
- Jack Smith, your friend and mine, wants to borrow money again.
- Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden*, wrote about his experience of living for two years in a cabin in the woods.

**Note:** An appositive (basically, a name) after an uncapitalized noun may not be a sentence interrupter:

- The famous author Henry David Thoreau lived in a tiny cabin.
- Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* is my favorite.
- Be careful to enclose an interrupter in two commas if it comes in the middle:
  - *Incorrect:* Jerry Blake, whom I think you know is going to college.
  - *Incorrect:* Jerry Blake whom I think you know, is going to college.
- If the clause or phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, then do not set it off with commas:
  - People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.
  - The tree that grows on the north side of the house is an oak.

### ♣ *After an Introductory Word, Phrase, or Clause:*

- When you see me again, I will be a changed man.



# Comma Chameleon

Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning at UIS



- As she held packages in both arms and her keys in her teeth, she fumbled for the door.

**Note:** If the introductory phrase is short and the meaning clear, then the comma may be omitted:

- At noon the employees met for a short union meeting.
- Finally the president took action.
- A sentence interrupter can come at the end of the sentence:
  - She fumbled to open the door, holding her packages in both arms.
  - You will find the water is cool, however.
- But not every word or group of words at the end of the sentence interrupts the sentence:
  - I will be leaving in a few minutes.
  - I will be a changed man when you see me again.

♠ *Between Adjectives in Places Where You Could Use And:*

- an ugly, disgusting wart BUT: a large frozen pizza
- a thick, juicy, rare steak BUT: a bright red rubber ball

♠ *After Each Element in a Date or Address (but not before the ZIP code):*

- On August 9, 1996, the building will be completed.
- She lives at 1700 S. Holmes Street, Springfield, Illinois 62704.

**A FINAL NOTE:** Don't separate the subject and its major verb with a comma, one of the commonest of errors:

- A barefoot, tattered boy, leads a dog down the street.
  - Should be: A barefoot, tattered boy leads a dog down the street.
- On June 1, she and her husband, set sail for Singapore.
  - Should be: On June 1, she and her husband set sail for Singapore.