



COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
OF RHODE ISLAND

Commas

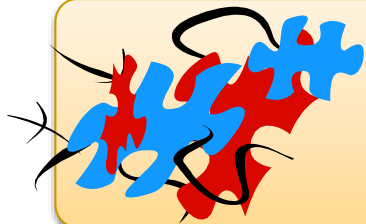
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COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF RHODE ISLAND

# The Logic of Commas

If no comma separates two words, readers will join them together. Commas show readers the parts of an idea.



**Incorrect and Confusing:**

*The classroom was absolutely perfect for students were smiling as they sat at their desks.*



**Correct and Logical:**

*The classroom was absolutely perfect, for students were smiling as they sat at their desks.*

# Comma Uses

A comma is often used with these items:

Introductory elements

Coordinating conjunctions

Subordinating conjunctions

Relative Pronouns

Conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases

Interruptions

Adjectives

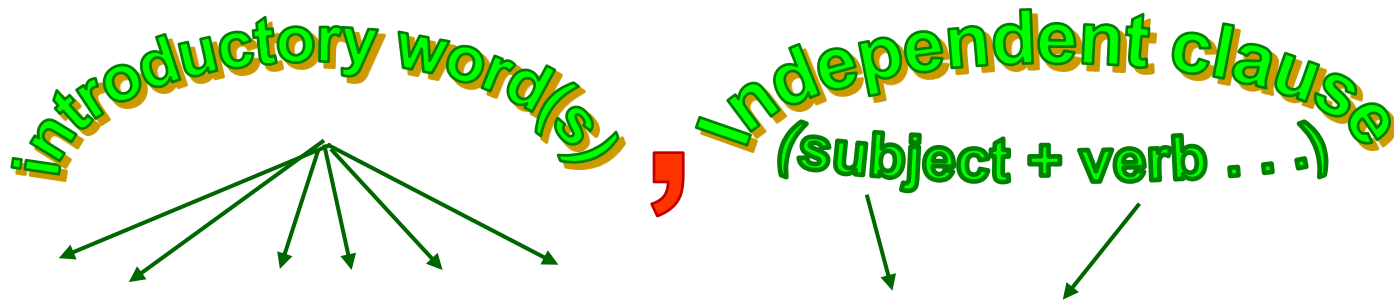
Addresses and dates

A lead-in phrase for a quotation



# Introductory Elements

When a word, a phrase, or a dependent clause introduces the main clause of a sentence, a comma is used to separate the word groupings from each other. The main clause (an independent clause) must contain both a subject and a verb.



On several desks in the classroom, textbooks were already open.

# Short Introductory Elements

If a very short prepositional phrase introduces a clause, then the introductory comma is optional. Both of these sentences are correct:

*In 2010 thousands of textbooks were in the bookstore.*

*In 2010, thousands of textbooks were in the bookstore.*

Whenever readers might become confused and have to reread parts of a sentence, a comma is required.

Wrong: *In 7070 textbooks will still be fun to read.*

Correct: *In 7070, textbooks will still be fun to read.*



# Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions

**(fanboys)**

join together similar  
clauses, words, or phrases.

<b>f</b>	<b>for</b>
<b>a</b>	<b>and</b>
<b>n</b>	<b>nor</b>
<b>b</b>	<b>but</b>
<b>o</b>	<b>or</b>
<b>y</b>	<b>yet</b>
<b>s</b>	<b>so</b>

# Coordinating Conjunctions

## Joining 2 Independent Clauses

When two independent clauses are joined with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is needed:

**clause**  
(subject + verb ...)

,

for  
and  
nor  
but  
or  
yet  
so

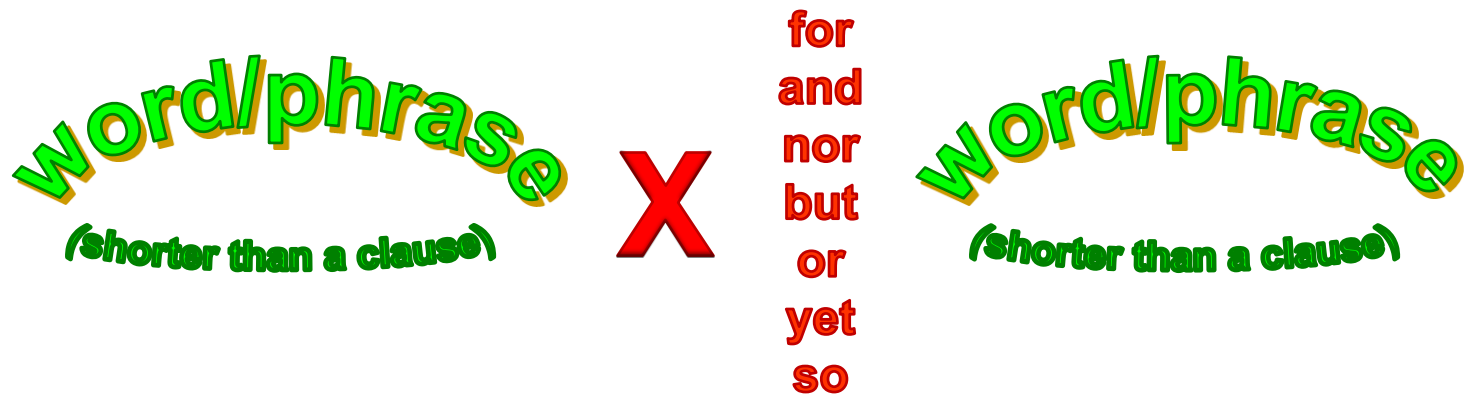
**clause**  
(subject + verb ...)

One student was reading a poem, **and** another was reading a story.

# Coordinating Conjunctions

## Joining 2 Words or Phrases

When **2** words or phrases are joined with a coordinating conjunction, **no comma** is used:



The story **and** the poem were both in literature textbooks.



# Coordinating Conjunctions

## Joining at Least 3 Words

When at least **3** words or phrases are joined with a coordinating conjunction, commas are needed:

Word/phrase  
(shorter than a clause)

,

Word/phrase  
(shorter than a clause)

,

for  
and  
nor  
but  
or  
yet  
so

Word/phrase  
(shorter than a clause)

The book contained over a hundred stories, poems, **and** plays.

# Subordinating Conjunctions

A **subordinating conjunction** connects a dependent (subordinate) clause to an independent clause.

**after**    **although**    **as**    **as if**    **because**  
**before**    **even**    **even though**  
**if**    **since**    **though**    **unless**    **until**  
**when**    **where**    **whether**    **while**

# Subordination in the Beginning

When a subordinate clause begins a sentence, a comma is needed to separate the two clauses:

after  
because  
if  
while  
though  
...

dependent clause  
(subject + verb ...)

,

independent clause  
(subject + verb ...)

*While* many of the poems were short, most of the plays were long.

# Subordination in the Ending

If a subordinate clause is at the end of a sentence, the comma is usually omitted.

Independent clause  
(subject + verb ...)



after  
because  
if  
when  
though  
...

dependent clause  
(subject + verb ...)

Most of the plays were long **while** many of the poems were short.

# Conjunctive Adverb or Transitional Phrase

Two clauses can be joined with a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase. A semi-colon (or a period) must be placed before the conjunctive word or phrase; then, a comma is put after the adverb or phrase.

**clause**

(subject + verb ...)

**for example**

**finally**

**however**

**on the other hand**

**then**

**therefore**

...

**clause**

(subject + verb ...)

The book contained many short poems; **for example**, one poem only had fourteen words.

# Interruptions

When a clause is interrupted with a conjunctive adverb or another word(s), commas are needed before and after the interrupting element.



A wonderful short poem, *for example*, is Ezra Pound's  
"In a Station of the Metro."

# Relative Pronouns “Relate” Ideas

A relative pronoun (**who, whom, that, which, whoever, . . .**) “relates” the words inside of its dependent clause to a noun or a pronoun in an independent clause.



Anyone **who** is happy can stay.

# Relative Pronouns in Dependent Clauses

Relative pronouns can join a dependent clause to an independent clause.

Independent (main) clause:

*Anyone can stay.*



Independent clause with an essential **dependent clause**:

*Anyone **who is happy** can stay.*

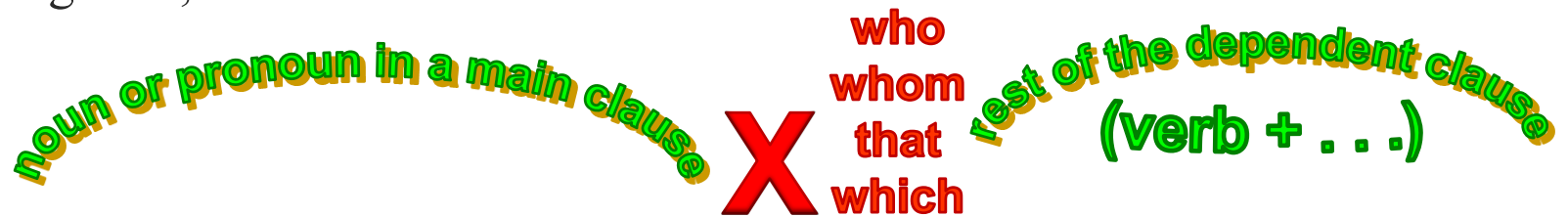


The meaning of “Anyone” is changed by “who is happy.”



# Relative Pronouns and Essential Meaning

When a dependent clause is essential to the meaning of a noun or pronoun, the dependent clause is restricting or changing the meaning of the noun or pronoun. A reader will need to put both of these items together, so no comma is used.

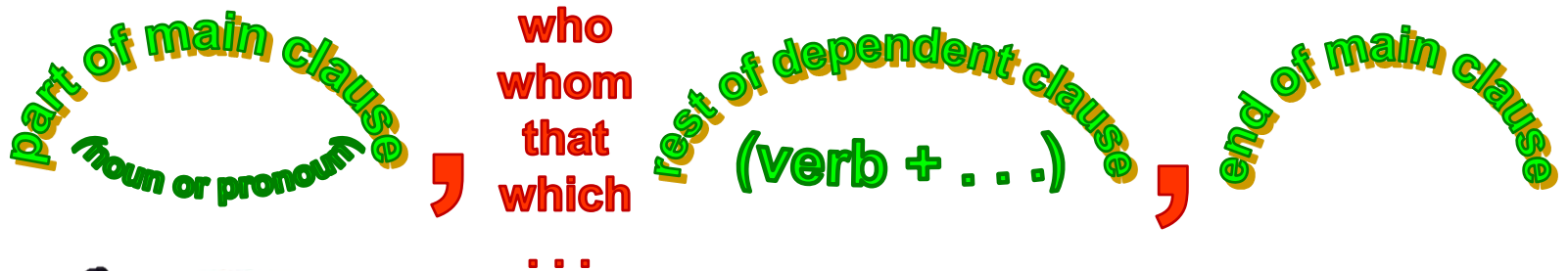


...

Anyone **who** is happy can stay.

# Relative Pronouns and Unessential Meaning

If a dependent clause is unessential to the meaning of a noun or pronoun, then the dependent clause is nonrestrictive. (It does not change the meaning of the noun or pronoun.) A reader will need to keep both of the items separate, so commas are needed.



Mary, **who** is happy, is a great student. (“Mary” has the same meaning, whether or not “who is happy” is included in the sentence.)

# Similar Adjectives

A comma is needed to separate coordinate (similar) adjectives. To figure out if adjectives are coordinate or not, a writer can join the adjectives together with the word “and.” If the adjectives joined by “and” still make sense and have the same meaning, then they are coordinate adjectives.



The *intelligent, creative student* is happy.

A comma is placed between “intelligent” and “creative” because “and” can join the adjectives together: *The intelligent and creative student is happy.*

# Different Adjectives

If two different kinds of adjectives modify a noun, they cannot logically be joined together with the word “and.” Therefore, no comma is needed.



The *two creative students* read their books.

No comma is used because “two” and “creative” cannot logically be joined by “and”: *The two and creative students read their books.*

# Addresses and Dates

In addresses and dates, commas separate different elements from each other:

*Joe was born on August 30, 1997, in a hospital located at 101 Main Street, Warwick, Rhode Island 02886.*

A comma is no longer included between a state and zip code.



# Signal Phrases for Quotations

A signal phrase needs a comma to separate it from the quotation:

In “Sonnet 116,” William Shakespeare says, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments.”

If lead-in words and a quotation are combined together into a single complete clause, then no comma is used:

William Shakespeare talks about love and connects it to “the marriage of true minds” in “Sonnet 116.”

# More Information

The Writing Center at the Community College of Rhode Island has more online resources.



# Contact Information

This presentation is the creation of

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