



Where do the commas go?

Commas are difficult. I used to think they weren't, but when I learned German, I started to get confused about which rule belonged to which language. It doesn't help that English speakers don't all agree among ourselves. So let's take a look at some sentences where a comma might be helpful, and others where a comma would be incorrect.

by Kel Barksdale

Writing dates and long numbers

When writing a date, put commas around the year.

On July 7th, 1993, this company was founded.

Thomas began working here on the 4th of January, 2005.

When writing numbers of more than three or four digits, put a comma every three places.

2000 or 2,000 (either is fine)

3,478,000

Making lists

Use commas to separate each of the items in a list. The comma between the last two items is optional, and English publications disagree on whether to use it. Personally, I prefer it.

We need to order more printers, laptops, and scanners.

OR

We need to order more printers, laptops and scanners.

Adding non-essential information

Take a look at this sentence:

Carrie, who had stopped listening, began to write something in her notebook.

You can remove the phrase between the commas and still have a complete and logical sentence. Now compare that with this:

The woman who was standing in the corner began to write something in her notebook.

Now the information is being used to identify the woman. Because it is necessary, there are no commas around it.

Introducing a quotation

When you are telling what someone said or wrote, put a comma between the person and the quotation. Commas and periods at the end of a quotation go inside the quotation marks.

Karsten said, "I'm planning to leave early on Friday."

Tyler wrote, "This work cannot continue as planned."

"I will need an extra assistant on this project," declared Petra.

Beginning a sentence with how, when, or where

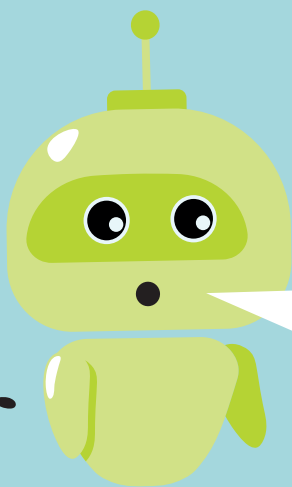
When you begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase (as I just did), you put a comma after it to separate it from the main action of the sentence. You can remember this as T(e)MP if you like: Time, Manner, Place. Any or all of these things can go at the beginning of a sentence before a comma.

At the office yesterday, the atmosphere was gloomy.

Like a man on a mission, Paul hurried down the stairs.

Once we started talking, I realized there were many things we agreed on.

If you flip the sentence around and put the TMP information at the end, the comma disappears. E.g., The atmosphere was gloomy at the office yesterday.



Providing two names/titles/descriptions for the same thing or person

Sometimes you might want to introduce something in multiple ways. If you are providing two types of identification for the same person, place, or object, put commas around the second one.

Angela Merkel, the former German chancellor, was on TV yesterday.

Minnesota, "Land of 10,000 Lakes," is an American state known for having many bodies of fresh water.

Using coordinating conjunctions

This one is a bit trickier. Put a comma between actions when each action could be a complete separate sentence, and you are using a coordinating conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. (Put them together and they spell FANBOYS). For short, simple sentences, people often leave out this comma.

We went for a walk(,) and I bought a sandwich.

You can call my office tomorrow between noon and four, or you can write me an email.

"I bought a sandwich" and "you can write me an email" can stand on their own without the first part of each sentence. Compare with these:

I had a meeting with him but not Laura.

Can you lend me a pen or a pencil?

The machine jammed and tore itself apart.

In these sentences, the part after the conjunction cannot stand on its own, so using a comma would be incorrect.

VOKABELTRAINING

digits
Ziffern

gloomy
gedrückt

publications
Veröffentlichungen

to jam
(hier) blockieren

