

FOUR BASIC COMMA RULES

1. Use commas to separate items in a series of three or more.

- Subjects in the program of study include English, math, and psychology.
- Go up two flights of stairs, turn right, walk to the end of the hall, and you will be there.
- The receptionist will admit you, the radiologist will x-ray you, the nurse will prepare you for surgery, and the surgeon will operate.

Note: The final comma in the list is optional. However, be consistent: either use it routinely or don't use it at all.

2. Use a comma to separate independent clauses (complete thoughts) when they are joined by these transition words:

and	nor	for	or	so	but	yet
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- Max started writing the draft two weeks ago, and he completed it today.
- We wanted to go to the movie, yet the idea of a quiet afternoon at home was also appealing.
- I have no intention of celebrating when I complete my degree, nor do I intend to go to the graduation.

3. Use commas to separate independent clauses (complete thoughts) from the word or words that introduce them.

- If I could relive my teenage years, I would do many things differently.
- However, Marx had a different theory.
- As a student, Ron had dreamed of being an Olympian athlete; unfortunately, his health made this dream impossible.
- By the time we got home, the late night news was over.

4. Use comma(s) to separate from the rest of the sentence any word or expression that is not essential to the sentence's meaning.

- Writing essays is not difficult, if you plan them well.
- Carol Shields, a university chancellor, wrote *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry's Party*.
- Valerie, predictably, was named class valedictorian.

Please add or delete commas, as necessary. If a sentence needs no corrections, mark it with a "C."

1. The guard dog a German Shepherd caught and permanently maimed the intruder.
2. The chief administrators and board members have private offices with windows.
3. While I was eating the dog was begging.
4. A child, who likes to play with matches, must be carefully watched.
5. He won two awards for novel of the year and he was named poet laureate of his country.
6. The hockey team acknowledging poor judgement lack of leadership and inadequate practice pulled out of the finals on April 3, 1996.
7. Bob Dylan, considered by many to be a cultural icon, disappointed many of his fans by permitting one of his songs to be used in a commercial for a bank.
8. Mercy killing is condoned by some theorists but condemned by others.

Answer Key

1. The guard dog, a German Shepherd, caught and permanently maimed the intruder.
2. C
3. While I was eating the dog was begging.
4. A child who likes to play with matches must be carefully watched.
5. He won two awards for novel of the year, and he was named poet laureate of his country.
6. The hockey team, acknowledging poor judgement, lack of leadership, and inadequate practice, pulled out of the finals on April 3, 1996.
7. C
8. C

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