

English Comma

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Abstract

This is a pedagogical text meant as a reference document for the EngGram Commatizer program. It defines and explains the different types of English commas recognized by the program, provides examples and discusses general strategies and tests for using commas in English.

1 Lists

1.1 Listing comma

A listing comma separates items in a list of three or more words, phrases or clauses. The last item is usually marked with "and" or "or", and has an optional comma (called Oxford comma).

*Peter loves good food, good company(,) and a practical joke.
Eat, dance(,) and have fun!*

The word "etc." and some related expressions ("and so on", "and so forth") should be set off from the rest of the list by a serial comma, and can be followed by an optional closing comma in mid-sentence.

You will find plates, cups, glasses, etc.(,) in the cupboard.

The Latin expression "et al." (meaning "and others"), when used with only one name, does not warrant a serial comma.

Martinson et al. (2015) showed that performance increased over time.

1.2 Oxford comma

The "and" or "or" before the last item in a list can have an optional comma, called Oxford comma and common in American English. Usage should be consistent for the entire text.

The lake was dotted with swans, ducks(,) and seagulls.

If it can help to resolve ambiguity, the Oxford comma becomes mandatory.

They sold beer, fish and chips, and peanuts.

An Oxford comma should not be used in a two-part coordination.

The tickets were cheap, but they decided otherwise[,] and stayed at home for a candle-light dinner.

2 Adjective comma

As attributes in a noun phrase, adjectives are separated by a comma if they are at the same level, i.e. if their order is interchangeable and they could be joined by "and".

She is a tall, beautiful woman. (a tall and beautiful woman - a beautiful, tall woman)

There should be no comma between adjectives that are not interchangeable and not coordinated (i.e. that don't allow "and"). This is typically the case if one of the adjectives is not simply descriptive, but rather defining, identifying, quantifying or indicating time or place.

*He showed off an expensive[,] German car. (*a German expensive car)*

If the second adjective has a premodifier, it is likely descriptive and warrants a comma:

a fascinating, very dynamic sports car

Even an adjective that would otherwise be an identifier, e.g. a nationality adjective, can be *interpreted* as descriptive by using it with a premodifier:

a flamboyant, very Spanish dance

3 Main clauses (Independent clauses)

A main clause is a clause that is not a constituent (object, subject, adverbial etc.) of another clause or phrase. The verb in a main clause is not a dependent of another word. In a syntactic dependency tree, it attaches directly to the root of the sentence.

Two main clauses (independent clauses) must always be separated from each other. If a coordinating conjunction is used ("and", "or", "but"), there should be a comma before it. Otherwise, use a full stop. Unless there is ambiguity, using just a comma, without the conjunction, is considered bad style (comma splice).

*You are quite right, and I shall send a new copy.
Some of you already knew, but now it is official.*

No comma is needed when coordinating two predicates, not even in a main clause. Only use a comma if both parts are full (independent) clauses with their own subjects.

*Peter bought a Guinness[,] and settled down in a corner.
I meant to buy tickets(,) but ran out of time.*

However, some people would use a comma in the second example, with "but" - not because of the coordination, but as an (optional) contrasting comma.

Note that imperative clauses are independent clauses, too, even though they do not have a subject. Therefore, a comma is needed between two coordinated imperative clauses, or in a combination of an imperative clause and a non-imperative independent clause:

*Take the pick-up, and get rid of the sofa!
Send back the damaged tool, and we will repair it.*

The milk is off, so throw it out!

4 Introductory comma

A comma is used between introductory material and the main clause proper. This holds for both phrases and clauses (cp. 5.1).

Having finally finished shopping, we went to the beach. (participle clause)

Because symptoms for this type of disease take years to appear, new cases are still being filed.
(finite subclause)

For this kind of disease, only experimental therapy is available. (prepositional phrase with two prepositions)

To file a formal complaint, please use the attached form. (infinitive clause)

If the introductory phrase is clear and short (3-4 words) or a simple prepositional phrase with only one preposition, the comma is optional.

In the meantime(,) I would like to show you a couple of pictures.

When in Rome(,) do as the Romans do.

If at all possible(,) government and parliament have to tread the same path.

Outside(,) seagulls played in the fresh autumn breeze.

Some individual words, mostly adverbs (*however, in fact, therefore, nevertheless, moreover, furthermore, still, instead*) and interjections, also warrant an introductory comma. After *then, so* and *yet*, the comma is optional.

However, it's not a free lunch.

No, I have not seen your boy-friend.

As always, ambiguity or the risk of reader backtracking can warrant a comma, even where it would not have been used otherwise.

Before feeding, the lion roared. (Without a comma, one may first read "the lion" as an object of "feeding", having to reconstruct the sentence when reaching the second, finite verb "roared")

The rules for introductory comma also hold *within* subclauses. A common case is a that-clause (object clause) that contains another, embedded subclause right after the conjunction:

Note that if you have Windows, you will not be able to use this program.

In this example, an additional, optional comma can be placed between the conjunctions "that" and "if" for clarity. However, this is not quite the same as a parenthetical interruption (cp. 8), that would need a comma pair, where both commas belong together and one cannot be used without the other:

Note that, if you haven't noticed already, you will not be able to use this program on a Windows machine.

5 Subclauses (dependent clauses)

A subclause or dependent clause is a clause that functions as a constituent in another clause. Finite subclauses are built around a finite verb (past or present tense), non-finite subclauses are governed

by a participle or infinitive. With the exception of one type of relative clause, finite subclauses start with a subordinating conjunction (e.g. "that", "if", "whether"), an interrogative (e.g. "what", "who", "why") or a relative pronoun ("which", "that", "who").

A nominal subclause can fulfill the same functions as a noun phrase, in particular subject, object and argument of a preposition.

He promised that he would come. (finite object clause)

To eat a lot of fat is not a good idea. (non-finite subject clause)

I am so grateful for what you have done for me. (finite clause, argument of preposition)

5.1 Comma after a subclause (closing comma)

When an adverbial subclause or an object clause is used in the beginning of a sentence, a closing comma is used after it (cp. 4). This holds for both finite and non-finite clauses. However, if the same clause occurs at the end of the sentence, no comma is used *before* it (cp. 5.2).

If you can make it, please reply to this message!

Please reply to this message[,] if you can make it.

To repair the damage, we would need a couple of days.

Note that subject clauses, unlike adverbial clauses, do not get a closing comma:

Painting the fence red will irritate the neighbours.

To paint the fence red will irritate the neighbours.

That the fence is being painted red will irritate the neighbours.

In the middle of a sentence, parenthetical subclauses have both an opening comma and a closing comma:

Although, as you will have seen, the dreaded millennium bug did not materialise, expensive preparations were made.

Introductory adverbial subclauses can be placed after the subordinator of another subclause, in which case they get a closing comma, but only optionally an opening comma.

He likes his aunt, who when she visits him, always brings chocolate.

She claims that if she eats burgers, a rash will ruin her face.

Other non-parenthetical embedded subclauses need neither an opening nor a closing comma. Such clauses are typically grammatically bound (e.g. "the belief that") or essential relative clauses, i.e. clauses that cannot be removed without changing the core meaning of the sentence.

His belief that news should be read on paper[,] is not shared by younger people.

5.2 Comma before a subclause (opening comma)

As a default, there is no opening comma for dependent clauses (subclauses) in English. This is an important difference to the German and Danish comma systems, where subclause opening commas are obligatory in the former and optional in the latter.

I've made them today[,] while it was snowing.

This is also true for non-parenthetical embedded clauses, especially relative clauses with essential information that can not be removed without changing the core meaning of the sentence.

The apples[,] he had bought[,] were all bruised.

An exception are (1) causal, (2) concessive and (3) adversative subclauses.

(1) Causal subclauses are introduced by "because", "as" or "since":

You don't have to worry about the cold, because you will be wearing a wet suit.

The comma before "because" is optional in the absence of ambiguity, but in the example it is mandatory: Due to the negation, wearing a wet suit could either be the reason for *not* worrying (long scope, comma) or not the *real* reason for worrying (short scope, no comma).

The comma before causal "since" and "as", however, does always make sense, since it is used to resolve a more general type of ambiguity - that between causal subclauses on the one hand (comma) and temporal or comparative subclauses on the other (without comma).

The bicycle was auctioned off four weeks later(,) as/since nobody had claimed ownership. (causal)

I haven't seen her[,] since she left the house this morning. (temporal)

He kept shaking his head[,] as he followed his friend into the tunnel. (temporal)

The movie was not as good[,] as I had expected. (comparative)

(2) Concessive subclauses beginning with "although", "even if", "unless" or "as far as":

Many big mammals are now endangered species, although some may survive in zoos.

(3) Adversative subclauses can be constructed with "whereas" or "while". Note that "while" does not get a comma when used temporally.

Their factories closed, while those in Ontario prospered.

The new government invested only in the capital, while neglecting the needs of rural villages.

The aircraft crashed[,] while flowing low over enemy territory.

An opening comma is also necessary for embedded (parenthetical) subclauses, where it is matched by a closing comma at the end of the subclause. After a conjunction opening another, higher-level clause (matrix clause), i.e. between two subordinating conjunctions, the opening comma before the embedded clause is regarded as optional by many people.

We hope that(,) once fighting has stopped, the country will recover quickly.

6 Appositions

6.1 Non-restrictive (parenthetical) appositives

An apposition is a construction with two parallel noun phrases where the second (called appositive) provides additional information about the first. Non-restrictive (parenthetical) appositives are surrounded by commas, while restrictive ones are not.

My best friend, Peter, will visit later this week.

Greece, a country with lots of sun and sea, attracts many tourists each summer.

The painter, one of the city's most promising young artists, began showing his work in galleries before he was sixteen.

A restrictive or defining appositive is one that conveys essential information that can not be omitted or enclosed in parentheses. In these cases, no comma is used. Thus, "My sister, Anne" (with comma) is non-restrictive and implies that I have only one sister, which is why the noun phrase is specific even without the name. "My sister Anne" (without comma), on the other hand, would be correct if there are two or more sisters, in which case the name is needed to safely identify the person referred to.

6.2 Title appositions

A special case are title appositions. Here, a person's title or profession, often in abbreviated form, is set off with commas. For "Jr." and "Sr." the comma is optional. It is not possible to use an opening title comma without a matching closing comma (or full stop).

Theodor S. Monroe, MD, chaired the session.
Jonathan Johnson, sales manager.
Martin Luther King(,) Jr.(,) quotes are famous.

6.3 Geographical expressions

An apposition comma is also used in the American English construction Town+State:

He was born in Memphis, Tennessee.
A list of Memphis, TN, Zip codes

Note that if the system is extended to the rest of the world, it often becomes Town+Country, not Town+State, even if the country in question has a federal state system. So it would be "*Hanover, Germany*" not "*Hanover, Lower Saxony*".

6.4 Works of art

When a noun denotes a work of art and is followed by the title of the piece, a comma may or may not be used to separate the two, depending on whether knowledge of the title is essential to identifying the artist's creation. Thus, in (a), there should be a comma, because "Bottoms Up" is exclusively what the author is known for. Here, the title is non-restrictive (non-essential). In (b), on the other hand, the title is restrictive (essential), since Michael Crichton is known for many books.

(a) *The Ted Saucier book, "Bottoms Up"*
(b) *Michael Crichton's book "Prey"*

If a publication title is followed by page numbers, publisher name or publishing place, all elements are separated with commas:

In: Proceedings of the 45th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics, pages 904 - 911, Prague, Czech Republic.

7 Relative clauses

Relative clauses are subclauses that function as appositives. English relative clauses are (only) enclosed in commas if the information provided is non-essential (parenthetical). Such relative clauses are called non-restrictive relative clauses and can be omitted without changing the core

meaning of the sentence. Because names are already specific by definition, they only allow relative clauses with a comma.

In American English, "which" is almost always non-restrictive and gets a comma.

Emma, who had not eaten all day, piled huge amounts of salad on her plate.

The Titanic, which sank in 1912, was built in Ireland.

They went to the city's harbour, where a dolphin had made its appearance the day before.

Sometimes a relative clause refers not to a noun phrase, but to an entire predication. Here, too, a comma is needed:

The sun and the moon have the same apparent sizes in the sky, which is surprising, given the huge differences in distance and factual size.

Relative clauses with essential information (so-called restrictive relative clauses), on the other hand, do not need a comma. This type of relative clause cannot be omitted without losing essential information and changing the basic meaning of the sentence.

Relative clauses with the pronoun "that" are almost always restrictive and therefore never get a comma.

The 12 stars[,] that adorn the EU flag[,] do not represent a country count.

The same goes for relative clauses without a relative pronoun altogether.

The car[,] he had bought[,] was old.

Relative constructions used in sentence clefting do not require a comma:

In the morning, it was they[,] who called Houston.

8 Parenthetical material

Parenthetical material, i.e. non-essential words, (prepositional) phrases or clauses that interrupt the sentence flow, are set off by commas. Typical expressions include "however", "after all", "on the other hand", "nevertheless", but also parenthetical comments, such as "I think" or "they say":

I have, by the way, finished the painting.

Nobody, they say, has ever found the grave of Genghis Khan.

That is precisely the time when you may, if you wish, raise this question

The parenthetical material may also take the form of an afterthought, triggering a comma before expressions beginning with "as well as" or "so much so that".

Similarly, there is an optional comma before "either" or "also" at the end of the sentence. However, this particular comma has become less popular than it used to be. Thus, many people only use it for emphasis.

I can't do this(,) either.

I'd like some cake(,) also.

Note that in the middle of a clause, parenthetical material gets a comma *pair*, not just a closing comma. In particular, it is easy to forget the opening comma after a coordinating conjunction such as "and" - where the comma does not necessarily match a pause:

Great food and,(!) of course, terrific entertainment.

If the coordinating conjunction binds together two main clauses, however, the parenthetical word or expression is no longer "in the middle", but at the beginning of the second main clause. Therefore, it is treated like introductory material in a single-clause sentence and gets only a closing comma (introductory comma).

There was a box at the border for voluntary tax declarations, but[,] of course, nobody ever used it.

At the beginning of a subclause, after a subordinating conjunction, parenthetical material can either be regarded as introductory or as embedded. In the first case, only an introductory (closing) comma is used, while the second interpretation warrants a comma pair. If you do use a comma (the parenthetical reading), the reader is prompted to pause after the conjunction.

They claimed that(,) for this kind of problem, only a reboot would help.

9 Vocatives

Commas are used to set off vocative elements in the sentence, i.e. the name, title or endearment term of a person directly addressed.

Yes, my dear, I will help.

Tell me about the game, Peter!

Madam President, let me ask a budget question.

10 Dates

10.1 day of the month

Day-of-the-month expressions are set off by commas. Thus, an opening comma is used between a weekday term and the date. A closing comma separates the day of the month from further information, such as time or place.

There will be a reception on Sunday, April 20, at five o'clock.

10.2 year

In date expressions, the year is set off with commas. Thus, there is an opening comma between the day of the month and the year, and a closing comma after the year.

October 3, 1989, was an important day in German history and heralded the end of the Cold War.

No comma is used where month and year appear next to each other:

A local temperature record was recorded in July[,] 2017.

3 October[,] 1989[,] was an important date.

You can find details in my September[,] 2019[,] article.

11 Quotes

Commas are used to set off direct quotations or to resume interrupted quotes. These quotation commas help to separate the quote from the attribute tag, i.e. the part of the sentence that identifies the speaker ("he said", "she suggested", etc.).

She said, "I don't mind."

"The problem is," he said, "that we don't know where to look."

This opening comma is optional with 1-word quotes:

He said "Stop!"

If a quotation precedes the quoting clause, it should be separated by a comma, unless there is other closing '!', '?' or ':' .

The general rule for American English is to have the comma inside the quotation, while British English places the comma after the quotation mark.

"I don't mind," she said. (AE)

"I don't mind", she said (BE)

This closing comma is obligatory, even after a 1-word quote.

"Please," he said. (AE)

"Please", he said (BE)

When a quotation follows a quoting verb without quotes, it functions just like any other object clause. And because verb and object must not be separated, a comma is prohibited.

She said[,] I don't mind.

Note also that there should be no quoting comma if the quote is a continuation of a that-clause:

He promised that[,] "all necessary precautions had been taken."

In the presence of other closing punctuation ('!', '?', ':'), the quotation end comma is omitted. In the case of a full stop, the quotation comma "wins", and the full stop disappears.

"Get out![,] " she screamed.

"Get out!"[,] she screamed.

12 Sentence add-ons (Extras comma)

A comma is used to separate small add-on utterances and other extra material at the end of a sentence, such as tag questions.

The roses are beautiful, aren't they?

She lives in Paris, doesn't she?

We haven't met, have we?

Are you stupid, or what?

I just know, ok?

*The party will be on the beach, where else?
He had disappointed both his math and history teachers, not that either mattered.*

13 Explanations

Examples and specifics require an opening comma before the triggering word ('e.g.', 'such as', 'i.e.', 'for instance'). In the US, an optional comma is sometimes used after the triggering word, too.

The shop sells mostly hiking gear, e.g. (,) boots, tents, sleeping bags and outdoor cooking utensils.

If examples are embedded inside a clause, a closing comma is necessary in addition to the opening comma.

Coniferous trees, such as pine and spruce, do not drop their needles in the winter.

14 Contrastive comma

This type of comma separates contrasting parts of a sentence, usually triggered by words like "but", "but never", "not only ... but", "yet". With "let alone" or "despite", the comma introduces a parenthetical contrast.

*It's excellence we're looking for, not an ideological position.
The players were nervous, yet optimistic.
He did not have the right, let alone the power to do so.*

A closing comma is needed at the end of an embedded contrasting insertion.

That is my money, not yours, that disappeared

A contrastive comma before 'but' is optional, unless the word joins two independent clauses (in which case the comma is obligatory).

15 Comparisons

There should not be a comma before a comparative "than" or "as".

*He is taller[,] than his brother.
He is as tall[,] as his brother.*

16 Sentence separation

In English, run-on sentences are considered bad style and should be avoided. The simplest way to break up a sentence in two is a full stop or semicolon. Another option is to use a conjunction, and in this case, the conjunction should be preceded by a comma. However, separating two sentences with only a comma (i.e. without a conjunction) is called a comma splice and rarely ok.

*Claire felt hungry,? she went to the fridge and made herself a sandwich.
--> Claire felt hungry. She went to the fridge and made herself a sandwich.
--> Claire felt hungry, so she went to the fridge and made herself a sandwich.*

17 No comma between subject and verb

Subject and verb must not be separated by a comma. This is a syntactic rule and as such takes precedence over the general pausing comma rule. So no comma should be used, no matter if a speaker would pause here.

My friend Peter[,] is a formidable Tennis player.

The most important attribute of a ball player[,] is quick reflex actions.

This rule applies even where the subject is a clause (a-b) or infinitive phrase (c-d), either before (b,d) or after the verb (a,c):

(a) It is a real problem[,] that we do not have enough players.

(b) That so many players have left the club[,] has become a real problem.

(c) It is the party's goal[,] to provide free health care for everybody.

(d) To provide free health care for all[,] is a noble political goal.

If there is intervening parenthetical material between the subject and the verb, however, it should be set off by a pair of commas, governed by other comma rules.

The cake, which had been garnished elaborately with blueberries and cream, did not even last to see the coffee.

We, just like other companies, will contact your former employer.

On the other hand, compound subjects and non-parenthetical appositions or restrictive relative clauses do not make a difference to the rule - no comma should be used here.

Your family and the people that like you most[,] are not necessarily the most likely to tell you the truth.

18 No comma between verb and object

There must not be a comma between a verb and a dependent object following it.

I need[,] a hot bath and mulled wine.

This holds even where the object is a clause or infinitive phrase:

We all like to think[,] that we are better drivers than the average person.

I think[,] she likes chocolate.

You can bring along[,] whoever you like.

He promised[,] to take care of the kids.

Quoted speech without quotes, after a quoting verb, is a special case of the above. Here, the quoted speech is treated as a normal object clause, and does not get a comma.

People always say[,] they need to exercise more, but statistics indicate that most of them never follow up on that promise.

19 Fronted objects

Sentence-initial (clausal) objects are set off by a comma.

*Just how deep the recession would be, no one could have imagined.
Any cuts on the existing deals, we are keeping together.
What his age was, I couldn't determine.*

20 Coordination

A coordination is a syntactic construction where two or more words, phrases or clauses (at the same syntactic level) are joined with commas or a coordinating conjunction ("and", "or", "but", "as well as"). The coordinated elements are called conjuncts, and the whole construction a coordinated unit.

In a multi-part, list-style coordination, the first conjuncts are separated with commas, and the last with a coordination. The latter can be preceded by a so-called oxford comma for reasons of clarity (UK) or tradition (US), cp. chapter 1.2.

In a two-part coordination, no comma is usually needed, as long as the coordination is straightforward and clear. This holds for nouns as well as verbs and prepositional phrases.

*Peter invited his family[,] and friends for a garden party.
SpaceX has launched another rocket[,] and retrieved it without incident.
They were inseparable in life[,] and in death.*

"Either...or" and "neither...nor" are no exception to the rule, and no comma is necessary.

Neither his son[,] nor his daughter shared his passion for diving.

20.1 Coordinated main clauses

However, two coordinated main clauses (independent clauses), with separate subjects, do get a separating comma.

Peter did the dishes, and Anne fed the cats.

Note that imperative clauses are independent clauses, too, even though they do not have a subject:

Have a look at the lyrics, and let me know what you think!

If a single main clause follows another main clause without a (coordinating) conjunction, this is normally called a run-on sentence. Here, a full stop or a semicolon should normally be used rather than a comma, avoiding the so-called comma-splice. However, sometimes a comma is acceptable for better coherence:

Ali Baba links each sentence to the source abstract from PubMed, simply click on the PubMed ID.

Similarly, a main clause can be the (second) part of a kind of a mini-list, where the first part is a free noun phrase. Here, too, many people use a comma rather than breaking up the sentence.

No pets allowed, children under 16 must be accompanied.

Another special case is a main clause followed not by another main clause, but by just a predicate where the subject is the same and therefore omitted. Normally, a coordinating conjunction - and no comma - should be used here. Sometimes, however, people do the inverse, using a comma without a conjunction, for stylistic reasons. Thus, in the example below, the subject-less predicate functions as a kind of parenthetical afterthought:

He seeks a better life, distances himself from his criminal heritage.

20.2 Coordinated subclauses

A coordination comma is optional for coordinated subclauses. The general preference is to omit the comma with short subclauses. However, if the second dependent clause has its own subject, an optional comma can be used for clarity or contrast, or simply to reduce complexity.

I realize more than ever what a special friend you are(,) and how much I have missed our conversations.

Personal data includes any data which indicates the identity of the person to whom it relates(,) or which can be used to identify that person.

I had heard that he had moved(,) and that his new job involved a lot of traveling.

20.3 Coordinated predicates

Contrary to standard practice, a comma can be used in predicate coordination if it helps to avoid ambiguity.

He spotted another team mate who entered the bar, and waved.

She saw that the child was hungry, and peeled a banana.

Many people also use a clarity comma in predicate coordination if the first part ends with another coordination, even though there is no true ambiguity in this case:

She was quiet and calm, and did n't talk much.

20.4 Nested coordination

A coordination comma is obligatory only between independent clauses (main clauses), but can optionally also be used in nested coordinations, to reduce complexity. Thus, in the sentence below, "reduction" is an object and coordinated with another object, "speed". Without the comma, confusion might arise, because the embedded coordination of the two arguments of the preposition "in" - "speed" and "design".

This would provide a large increase in effective speed and design flexibility(,) and a large reduction in cost.

20.5 Parenthetical coordination

Contrary to standard practice, there can be a comma before a coordinating conjunction if the conjunct is parenthetical (non-essential), i.e. functions as a kind of afterthought. In this case, there should be a second comma at the end of the conjunct, unless the sentence ends there.

This improved access also enables people without speech, or with speech difficulties, to communicate directly with their MSP's.

Some funds are allowed to take bull and bear positions in a range of financial instruments, and even in agricultural commodities, where there is a perceived opportunity for profit.

Used as a coordinator, the word "plus" has a parenthetical effect, so a comma should be used before it. This holds both in a two-part coordination and after another coordination or list:

My sister, plus her growing family, was scheduled to disturb our tranquil island holiday over the weekend.

I had electrical stimulus, infra-red heat, hot packs and massage, plus cranial osteopathy to redress the imbalance of my energy flow.

20.6 Complexity comma

People sometimes use a comma in a two-part coordination because it is difficult to see what the second conjunct attaches to. Consider the following sentence:

Bernard has served as editor of the Bryologist, and on adjudication committees for IAB as well as the American Bryological and Lichenological Society.

First, the coordination is nested (cp. 20.4): The conjunct after "as well as" attaches to "IAB", not to the first conjunct left of "and". Second, the "and" has three theoretical points of attachment to a first conjunct - "Bryologist", "editor" and "as editor". Because of the preposition "on", it is clear that the first conjunct also needs to start with a preposition ("as"), but the comma helps the reader to stop and backtrace to that point of the sentence, mounting the coordinated unit "as editor and on adjudication committees".

21 Pauses

In English, an optional comma can be used at the writer's discretion in order to mark reading pauses. This type of comma can be used even where no other rule warrants a comma, but it should be used sparingly and it must not conflict with syntactic constraints. In particular, pause commas are not possible between prenominal dependents and the noun, or between the verb and its subject or object.

This[,] mindblowing experience

22 Number formatting

In English, a dot is used to mark the decimals in a number, while a comma groups digits into groups of three, i.e. thousands, millions, billions, etc. In German, Danish and most other European languages, it's the opposite.

123,000,609

0.74

13.19237

Segmenting commas are not used in numbers occurring in addresses:

1024, Heathrow Rd.

23 Parentheses

There should never be a comma before a parenthesis. If the sentence would have a comma without the part in parentheses, that comma is placed after the closing parenthesis.

With eighteen races run, there are twelve to go[,] (40 % of the series).

It's second rate, in any case[,] (he added smiling) so the artistic loss to the world will be nil.

The comma should here be moved after the closing parenthesis:

It's second rate, in any case (he added smiling), so the artistic loss to the world will be nil.

24 Too

The word "too" is set off with an optional comma when meaning "also". In the middle of the sentence, it is surrounded by a comma pair.

Claire, too, wanted a piece of the action.

Can I have a copy, too?

25 Ellipsis

Verb-elliptical constructions, i.e. two clause constituents with the (repeated) verb omitted, should be set off from the preceding part of the sentence.

Peter bought a hat, and his girlfriend [bought] a scarf.

He sent his son to London, but [sent] his daughter to Paris.

Observing tradition, the mafia boss gave his son a car, and [gave] his daughter a horse.

Without a coordinating conjunction, the comma is the only marker of where the elliptical construction starts:

Peter bought a hat, his girlfriend [bought] a scarf.

26 Infinitive phrases

In general, no comma is needed before an infinitive phrase, especially if the infinitive phrase expresses purpose (a) or functions as an object (c) or subject (d).

(a) 50 would-be volunteers met in the Ealing YMCA[,] to learn about AIDS.

(b) Most troops had left the day before, leaving the villagers[,] to fend for themselves.

(c) He promised[,] to take care of the kids.

(d) It is the party's goal[,] to provide free health care for everybody.

However, if the infinitive phrase functions as a parenthetical add-on to the sentence, a comma is required:

There is a bit of uncertainty here, to say the least.

China, Mexico and Brazil also had negative growth, to mention just a few of the other crisis victims. They had spotted a handful of red strawberries in the evening, only to find them eaten by snails in the morning.

As a dependent of a noun phrase, infinitive phrases work like relative clauses: They will command a comma if - and only if - the information contained is non-restrictive.

A non-profit organisation run by disabled people, to be used by all.

One ring to rule them all

27 Scope

Commas can be used to resolve scope ambiguity, even where they would not otherwise be required. For instance, two adjectives coordinated with "and" do not normally get a *comma*. However, if the first of them is modified with "very" (c), a scope ambiguity arises as to whether the intensifier also applies to the second adjective (wide scope) or only to the first (narrow scope). The long-scope interpretation can be prevented by using a comma before the "and" (d).

(a) an intelligent and curious girl

(b) an intelligent and very curious girl

(c) a very intelligent and curious girl

(d) a very intelligent, and curious girl

A similar scope ambiguity may occur for adjectival modifiers of coordinated nouns. Thus, the comma before "and" in (f) forces a narrow scope and a scenario where even young women are exempt from military service. Adding a closing comma after "women" also resolves the scope ambiguity, but adds a parenthetical effect to the coordination.

(e) Old men and women are exempt from compulsory military service.

(f) Old men, and women(,) are ex(mpt from compulsory military service.

28 Syntactic structure

A good reason to use a comma in English is sentence structure. Thus, a comma may force one syntactic reading over another by introducing a constituent boundary. Without a comma, "ads" in (a) can attach to "updated", as a subject, telling us that thousands of ads are/were updated daily. With a comma (b), we have two separate chunks - (1) there are thousands of ads and (2) those are updated daily. (a) focuses on the quantity and speed of updates, without telling us how many there are in all, while (b) emphasizes the overall number of ads, all of which are up-to-date.

(a) 1000s of ads updated daily

(b) 1000s of ads, updated daily

Websites:

Commatizer: Automatic comma checking with error identification and explanations:

<https://commatizer.com>

For German (**Kommatroll**): <https://kommatroll.com>

For Danish (**RetMig**): <https://retmig.com>