

## COMMAS, COMMAS, COMMAS

Commas are there to help your audience understand you; without comma mastery, your message could be lost.

### INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS

An introductory element is a word or phrase that *introduces* an idea but requires additional information to complete this idea (and sentence).

*As the alligator chomped* the small child giggled inappropriately.

Wait...what happened? If the alligator chomped *while* the brat giggled, then we need to separate the introductory element, *as the alligator chomped*, with commas to clarify the sentence:

As the alligator chomped, the small child giggled inappropriately.

If the alligator did indeed chomp the child, then we need to clarify who giggled:

As the alligator chomped the small child, **it** giggled inappropriately.

Usually you can identify an introductory phrase by looking for words such as *although, however, though, as, while, before, after*, etc. You can also use the *stare test*. Go up to someone and say, "as the alligator chomped," and watch their reaction. If they stare and wait for more information, then this is an introductory element and needs some comma action.

We could even go about this in an entirely different way. Using our original sentence, if we swapped the order of *as the alligator chomped* and *the small child giggled inappropriately* then we would not need a comma to link them.

The small child giggled inappropriately as the alligator chomped.

Since *the small child giggled inappropriately* is complete by itself, it is not an introductory phrase, and we do not need commas. And to convey the second meaning, that the alligator chomped the child, we clarify who did what just like before:

The small child giggled inappropriately as the alligator chomped **him**.

### CONJUNCTIONS AND OTHER CONNECTING WORDS

Conjunctions are words that link two statements together. They include *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so* (you can remember these with the abbreviation *fanboys*). You can also use other connecting words like *because* to link two clauses together.

#### When you need a comma

The woman saw the shark. She bit him.

As they stand now, nothing is grammatically wrong with these sentences, but the choppiness is distracting to the story. Here's where conjunctions come in. To show the relationship between these statements, we can fluidly connect them with a conjunction.

The woman saw the shark, **so** she bit him.

Adding *so* illuminates the connection between these ideas, giving the originally choppy sentences more impact. You can saturate your writing with meaning merely by using conjunctions and commas to express yourself.

#### When you don't need a comma

When describing something

The poodle scurried from the squirrels' epic **and** immediate stampede.

The words *epic* and *immediate* are linked together by the conjunction **and**. We do not use a comma, however, because these two words come together to describe the force of the stampede and are not sentences or statements by themselves.

## LISTS

I went on a murderous rampage with my cousin, my hairdresser, my mother's best friend's roommate from college and her husband, and my cat.

Here, commas separate each element of the list. Notice that some items of the list, like *my sister's boyfriend and his mom* constitute a single item even though it includes more than one person. Separating elements of the list with commas gives you the power to define and organize your list.

## QUOTES

Use commas when quoting something inside a sentence.

And then he said, "I don't care what your mother's name is, but my hippo's name is Sally!"

The comma serves as a transition from your own words into the quote.

## NONESSENTIAL INFORMATION

This rule requires your judgment. Basically, if your audience needs the information to understand who or what you're talking about, then you don't put it in commas. If your audience would get it without the extra information then you want to frame it with commas.

My friend *of course* tragically died in a freak rhinoceros accident.

Would the audience know what's going on without saying *of course*? Yes. Do I feel like adding it anyway? Yes. So we need to frame it with commas like this:

My friend, **of course**, tragically died in a freak rhinoceros accident.

A good rule of thumb is if you can move the phrase within the sentence or remove it altogether, then it is nonessential information and, therefore, needs a comma smackdown.

## WHEN ADDING DESCRIPTION

When you interrupt your thought to further describe the subject, frame it in commas.

My cat, **born in 1902**, was the one to pull the trigger.

While this is related to the previous rule, it applies even when the information is essential to your message.

## WORDS OF WISDOM

NEVER separate the actor (subject) of the sentence from its action (verb).

DO NOT use commas to connect two independent statements (two phrases that could stand alone as their own sentences). Remember to use conjunctions *with commas* or other types of punctuation (semicolons, dashes, periods) to connect (or separate) these.

BE CAREFUL to use commas to clarify your meaning, not confuse it; if the sentence looks crazy with commas then you probably sound crazy.