

Writing Center

Tidewater Community College

Phone: 757-822-7170

Fax: 757-427-0327

<http://www.tcc.edu/writing>

COMMA USAGE GUIDELINES

Use commas with dates:

On July 19, 2003, I turned 38.

I turned 38 on July 19, 2003

Use commas with places, cities, and addresses:

My parents moved to Miami, Florida.

Do you live at 115 North Street, Chesapeake, VA 23321?

(There is no comma before zip code; also, there is no comma after zip code UNLESS the address appears in the middle of the sentence.)

Use commas when you have three or more items in a series, regardless of how long the items are (one-word items, phrases, etc. can be made pa). Each item except the last one should be followed by a comma, and “and” or “or” should be used between the last and next to last item:

I want to eat dinner, brush my teeth, *and* go to bed.

I like apples, peaches, or blueberries on my cereal.

If I were you, I would paint that old car, replace the speakers, and buy new seat covers.

Two items in a series require no commas, just a conjunction:

I like bananas and strawberries.

I need a wallet and a key chain.

Use a comma after an introductory word (which comes before the subject of a sentence) or any phrase (including prepositional). Be careful not to form comma splices.

Quietly, the cat crept up on a cricket.

Dazed and confused, the accident victim struggled to find help.

Silently, the boat drifted out to sea.

During fall break, I plan to ski.

Use commas when using a subordinating conjunction in the beginning of a sentence.

Because she missed the bus, she was unable to take her final exam.

Although I am tired, I need to study.

Use commas after words or phrases that interrupt the sentence's flow. If the phrase appears in the middle of the sentence, commas are needed both before and after.

By the way, you missed a great concert.

This is, without a doubt, the best chocolate cake I've ever eaten.

Use commas to set off non-essential elements from the rest of the sentence:

Kathy, my oldest sister, is the wildest of all my sisters.

Suffolk, Virginia, once known for its farms, is becoming a crowded city.

She bought an expensive painting, a rather beautiful landscape.

Use commas to separate adjectives and adverbs in a series when they are not separated by "and."

I could not stand on the frozen, slippery sidewalk.

I could not stand on the frozen and slippery sidewalk. (no comma needed)

If you cannot use "and" in between the modifiers, then no comma is ne

I need some fresh apple pie for dessert.

Use commas to set off direct addresses to a person or people:

Ladies and gentlemen, please help me welcome our next guest.

I hope, ladies and gentlemen, that you will welcome our next guest.

Jeremy, I asked you to turn down your music.

I told you, Jeremy, to turn down your music.

I told you to turn down your music, Jeremy.

Do not use commas between two complete ideas (sentences/independent clauses). This is a *comma splice error* since a comma is not a strong enough punctuation mark to combine two thoughts, and it is not emphatic enough to separate two thoughts. You must use a subordinating conjunction, a coordinating conjunction, or another connecting word to eliminate the error.

Incorrect: I am hungry, I am going to Taco Bell.

Correct: Because I am hungry, I am going to Taco Bell.