

## The Comma

*“Commas are the most useful and useable of all the stops...[do not] stick them in [all] the various spots that tempt you...[It is] better to use them sparingly and with affection.”*

*---Lewis Thomas, The Medusa and the Snail*

The number of commas in a sentence does not determine its greatness. In fact, writers often use commas too often. Commas are used to clarify your writing. They should allow an audience to read your essays with more ease. They should not hinder the flow of your ideas.

Commas are required in the following instances:

**1. Compound Sentences – before coordinating conjunctions that join independent clauses.**

Independent clause (+), coordinating conjunction (+) independent clause  
(sentence) (and, but, or, nor, for, so,yet) (sentence)

My son can read a story, or he can watch a play.

**2. After introductory words (phrases or clauses)**

After exploring several career fields, Pat decided to become a musical therapist.  
Fortunately, we enjoyed it very much.

However, we did not have time to see the movie.

As he entered the candlelit church, Richard felt a comforting peace.

**3. Between items in a series**

Becoming a good writer required hard work, practice, and dedication.

The narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” desires freedom to think, to write, and to redecorate her room.

**4. Between coordinate adjectives**

Climbing Mount LeConte was an exhilarating, moving experience.

**5. Around nonrestrictive (nonessential) words or phrases**

Flannery O’Connor, a Southern writer, has much in common with William Faulkner.

She had hoped, of course, to marry Homer Barron.

Eric, the first in his family to graduate college, walked proudly across the stage.

Dr. Smith, a respected dentist, donates five hours a week to the free medical clinic.

Many people, as Dr. Stanley points out, are afraid of showing love and affection.

**Commas** are also used in dates (May 28, 1971) and addresses.

Edythe Temple visited Sevierville, Tennessee, on May 28, 1971, in hopes of finding her sister Ethel.

**\*\*Although these are not all the cases in which commas are used, they are the most important and common. If you encounter other situations that you think demand commas, refer to *Writing at C-N*. When in doubt, leave it out!**