Comma Use
Dr Robert G. May | Department of English

The comma is the mark of punctuation that writers most often misuse. Misuse, overuse, or underuse of the comma can render incomprehensible a clear and otherwise grammatically correct sentence. By endeavouring to use the comma appropriately, writers ensure that their sentences read more coherently and that they express their ideas more clearly.

Commas in Series

In a series of three or more terms (words, phrases, or clauses) with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term, including the term immediately before the conjunction.

- ✗ Margaret Atwood's first three novels are *The Edible Woman Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*.
- ✗ Margaret Atwood's first three novels are *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*.
- ✓ Margaret Atwood's first three novels are *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*.

Commas with Parenthetical Expressions

Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.

- ✗ Robertson Davies who attended Queen's University between 1932 and 1935 wrote *The Salterton Trilogy*.
- ✗ Robertson Davies who attended Queen's University between 1932 and 1935, wrote *The Salterton Trilogy*.
- ✓ Robertson Davies, who attended Queen's University between 1932 and 1935, wrote *The Salterton Trilogy*.

Commas with Restrictive vs Non-Restrictive Clauses

Enclose non-restrictive clauses (clauses that do not serve to identify or define the antecedent noun) between commas.

- ✗ Nether Stowey where Coleridge wrote "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is near Bridgewater.
- ✗ Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is near Bridgewater.
- ✓ Nether Stowey, where Coleridge wrote "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," is near Bridgewater.

Do not enclose restrictive clauses (clauses that do serve to limit or define the antecedent noun) between commas.

- ✗ Poets, who wrote pastorals, were usually familiar with the countryside.
- ✓ Poets who wrote pastorals were usually familiar with the countryside.

Commas with Subordinate Clauses

When a phrase or subordinate clause precedes the main clause of a sentence, use a comma to set off those elements.

- ✗ Desperate for money the main character in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* turns to a life of crime.
- ✓ Desperate for money, the main character in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* turns to a life of crime.

Commas with Coordinating Conjunctions

Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, yet, so) introducing an independent clause.

- ✗ *War and Peace* is a lengthy novel but its plot is relatively linear.
- ✓ *War and Peace* is a lengthy novel, but its plot is relatively linear.

Commas with Independent Clauses

Do not join independent clauses by a comma, as this formulation creates a comma splice.

- ✗ *War and Peace* is a fascinating novel, it has an exciting plot.
- ✓ *War and Peace* is a fascinating novel; it has an exciting plot.
- ✓ *War and Peace* is a fascinating novel. It has an exciting plot.
- ✓ *War and Peace* is a fascinating novel, and it has an exciting plot.

Do not split sentences in two, as this formulation creates a sentence fragment.

- ✗ Coleridge had many opportunities to see Wordsworth. Living himself in the Lake District.
- ✓ Coleridge had many opportunities to see Wordsworth, living himself in the Lake District.

Commas with Coordinate Adjectives

Use a comma between coordinate adjectives (adjectives that separately modify the same noun).

War and Peace is a moving fascinating novel.
War and Peace is a moving, fascinating novel.

Works Cited

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 8th ed., MLA, 2016.

Strunk Jr, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 3rd ed., Macmillan, 1979.