Advice for Deciding Where to Put a Comma

Note: Commas can be difficult to understand, especially when there's so many rules to remember. These are not strict guidelines, so it's important to consider the purpose, audience, and effect when choosing to omit or include a comma. This guide explains some common uses of commas according to United States academic conventions.

FANBOYS

For, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

Put the comma beforehand to separate the two clauses or ideas.

I need to make an appointment at the Writing Center, but there aren't any openings.

My professor gave me confusing feedback on my draft, so I went to the Writing Center.

Lists

Put a comma between each item on a list.

I need to buy eggs, milk, apples and pears at the grocery store.

Parenthetical Phrases

A parenthetical phrase is a phrase that is inserted into a sentence using commas or dashes to add extra information. If taken out, the meaning and structure of the original sentence remains.

My consultant, a senior at SU, was very helpful.
VS
My consultant was very helpful.

Multiple Adjectives

A comma is used between coordinate adjectives, or two adjectives that describe the same noun. To figure out if two adjectives are coordinate, the comma can be replaced with "and."

My professor said my last essay had long, complicated sentences.
VS
My professor said my last essay had long and complicated sentences.

Semicolons

Semicolons can also be used to separate two clauses, although these ideas must be independent and have no connecting word, such as FANBOYS. To have an independent clause, the idea must be able to be its own sentence. A semicolon can be used instead of separate sentences when the ideas presented are connected.

I always get so much help at the Writing Center; my friend works there.
VS
I always get so much help at the Writing Center. My friend works there.

The Oxford Comma

The Oxford Comma is an optional comma that is used when listing items. The Oxford Comma would come before the word "and" or the word "or" in the list, before stating the last item.

The Writing Center has computers, tablets, pencils, and paper.

Separating Clauses

A sentence is made up of independent and dependent clauses, and these are separated using commas. An independent clause is a complete sentence, whereas a dependent clause is a sentence fragment and cannot stand on its own. This can help with sentence clarity and can also be applied to sentences made up of two independent clauses.

In the following example, "To get help with my essay" is a dependent clause while "I made an appointment at the Writing Center" is an independent clause, so they need to be separated by a comma.

To get help with my essay, I made an appointment at the Writing Center.

Sources
• Purdue Owl Writing Lab "Commas: Quick Rules"
• Purdue Owl Writing Lab "Commas vs. Semicolons in Compound Sentences"