Commas

Contrary to what you may have heard, comma placement has nothing to do with pauses or breaths. Instead, commas belong in specific places for specific reasons. Read the following examples to get a feel for where commas go in different situations. After you read the examples, read the explanation. Then try to write a few sentences based on each situation.

Introductory elements

You need a comma after an introductory element. For instance, *the vampires come out to play* is a sentence on its own. *In the evening* introduces the sentence and needs to be set off with a comma. You also need a comma after a dependent clause, as in the second example.

In the evening, the vampires come out to play.

Because jelly is made primarily of sugar, we put it on everything we can.

Independent clauses combined with for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

You need a comma between two independent clauses when they are joined by a coordinating conjunction like for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. *The band packed up* is a sentence on its own. *Everyone waltzed home through the woodlands* is a sentence on its own. When you use the word "and" to link the two sentences, you need a comma between them.

The band packed up, and everyone waltzed home through the woodlands.

He didn't need to think about it, for he was the man with the plan.

Lists

You need commas to separate items in a list, including nouns, verb phrases, or independent clauses. When writing academically, use the oxford comma—the comma before the last item in the list.

You can dip it in oil, gasoline, or marshmallow sauce.

I normally rehearse all my jellyfish-themed showtunes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Quotes

You need a comma when introducing or transitioning from a quote unless the quote is worked into the sentence, as in, *My best friend says that "we try to cover it in marshmallows."*

She looked at me and said, "Can you believe it? Jelly?"

"We try," she explained, "to cover it in marshmallows."

Names, yes, no...

Use commas to set off direct addresses (names), yes and no, interrogative tags (like *wasn't it?*), and mild interjections (like *well*).

I'm sorry, Eleanor, that I put jelly in your hair!

No, we definitely don't put jelly on that.

That was the last bathroom for miles, wasn't it?

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Paired adjectives

You need a comma between adjectives that could go in any order—they're not cumulative and could be separated by the word "and." Do not use a comma between adjectives that need to be in a particular order as in these cases: *I love my new wooden comb. I will bring my giant toothpaste stash to show and tell.*

The farmers hand-pick each golden, plump bananafish from among the multitudes.

I can't wait to attend the exciting, new Carnival for Werewolves!

Extra information

You need commas to set off non-restrictive (non-essential) elements added to a sentence. The commas act like "handles" around that part, which would let you lift it out of the sentence. You do not need commas in sentences with restrictive (essential) elements. Example: *The route that I take most often is through the time-traveling phone booth.*

The pink river dolphins, keepers of all jelly wisdom, showed us to the tiny portal.

We discovered the Land of Jelly Kid, a world surprisingly similar to our own.

reminders

Don't place a comma between the **subject** and *verb* of a sentence (except in the case of the "Extra information" examples).

✕   The **trombonist** with the broken horn, *made* another one out of mashmallow jars.

✓   The **trombonist** with the broken horn *made* another one out of marshmallow jars.

Don't place a comma between two sentences unless you use a *coordinating conjuction*.

✕   Rock won, scissors lost.

✓   Rock won, *and* scissors lost.

✓   Rock won. Scissors lost.

✓   Rock won; scissors lost.

Don't place a comma between two *verbs* that have the same **subject**.

✕   **Patsy** *went* to the party in Hollywood, and *arrived* just in time for the jelly tasting.

✓   **Patsy** *went* to the party in Hollywood and *arrived* just in time for the jelly tasting.

✓   **They** *went* to the party in Hollywood, and **Patsy** *arrived* just in time for the jelly tasting.

Don't place a comma before a dependent clause—a phrase that begins with a subordinating word like *because, since, unless,* or *if.* (Remember, these are different from coordinating conjunctions—see "Independent clauses combined with for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so".)

✕   I was so excited, because everyone remembered my great-grandmother's jelly recipe.

✓   I was so excited because everyone remembered my great-grandmother's jelly recipe.

✓   Because everyone remembered my great-grandmother's jelly recipe, I was so excited.