

Four (Simplified) Comma Rules

While punctuation rules about commas are often depicted as either correct or incorrect, we at the Global Communication Center think that sometimes the “rules” are not that clear-cut.

Punctuation is often dependent on the author’s intention: what information *you* want to emphasize. These four simplified comma rules will NOT apply to every scenario, but they can serve as a beneficial rule of thumb to guide where and when to use a comma. ¹

Four Core “Rules”

1. Commas signal where the main statement in a sentence begins. (*Begin*)
2. Commas signal a change in the direction or focus of a sentence. (*Change direction*)
3. Commas separate essential from supplemental information. (*Separate*)
Note: This rule does not apply to two independent clauses.
4. Commas distinguish complete statements that have been linked with a coordinating conjunction (i.e., for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). (*Link*)

Explanation and Examples:

We are going to use the concept of a race to visualize and characterize how commas function in a sentence. Think about commas as indicating to the reader how to move through the sentence (race course) and what to expect.

1. Commas are a visual start line.
The first part of the sentence prepares us for the main part. Commas tell the reader when the race course (the main part of the sentence) begins.



Example: As far as I am concerned, Thanksgiving is a boring holiday.

Core Rule: Commas signal where the main statement in a sentence begins. (*Begin*)

2. Commas alert the reader to a turn in the road.
Readers on the main race course may need to turn a corner. A comma will alert the reader to an upcoming turn that provides extra, although not essential, information to the reader.



Example: I like dogs, but not cats.

¹For the complete comma rules, see the Purdue OWL.

Core Rule: Commas signal a change in the direction or focus of a sentence. (*Change direction*)

3. Commas indicate helpful, but not necessary, materials (such as food or water along the race course).

Commas will help the reader distinguish essential material from non-essential or supporting elements that merely add to our understanding of the main sentence. In terms of a race, that might mean a water or food station: runners do not have to get water, but it could help them run the race better.



Example: Aaron thought he could see the future, not the past, in the wrinkles on his skin.

Core Rule: Commas separate essential from supplemental information. (*Separate*)

4. Commas visually demonstrate how two essential sections of a race course fit together. When we want to connect two main clauses, to show that they are equally important, we can connect them using coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Think about the comma before the coordinating conjunction as alerting the reader that they still have another major section of the race to run: they are basically at a half-way point.



Example: Jenny tried the sushi, and she found that it was surprisingly tasty.

Core Rule: Commas distinguish complete statements that have been linked with a coordinating conjunction (i.e., for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). (*Link*)