

## The Comma

While words convey thoughts and ideas in written language, punctuation marks put the words into understandable and meaningful groups. Consider how difficult it would be to read a page of words without punctuation!

Commas and periods are the most abundant punctuation marks. While the rules governing the use of periods are simple, the rules governing the use of commas are much more complex. Commas define sub-units within sentences. Rules concerning the use of commas are complex, because these sub-units occur in many different forms.



In some situations, the rules concerning the use of commas are definite. In others, the rules can be vague, because commas may be optional. In all cases, the paramount consideration should be clarity and ease of reading. The reader should never have to stop and back up to determine what the author means.

In technical journals, most commas are found separating items in a series. Rules vary; a comma before the “and” or “or” of a series is optional. There is no inherent right or wrong in this case. Authors who publish in several journals should simply conform to the style of each respective journal. WSSA uses this comma. Thus, “a, b, c, and d” rather than “a, b, c and d” would be correct in WSSA publications.

Commas indicate whether a clause is restrictive or non-restrictive, and thus are crucial to the meaning of a sentence. Consider this sentence. Weeds, which emerged before May 15, suppressed yields. The clause is non-restrictive (simply descriptive), and gives information about all the weeds. Commas indicate that this is the case. Without commas, the clause would be restrictive. The meaning would then be that weeds emerging before May 15 suppressed yields, while those emerging later did not. A current trend improves clarity by using “that” rather than “which” for restrictive clauses. Thus, “Weeds *that* emerge before May 15 suppressed yields” would be the preferred restrictive form, whereas “which” and commas identify the non-restrictive.

Commas separate “equal” modifiers. A comma makes “the long, deep, brown rhizomes” different from “the long, deep brown rhizomes.”

Commas may be used to set off parenthetical phrases or inserted information. Example: John stated, and the evidence showed, that frost had injured the plants.

Words can sometimes be omitted from sentences without loss of meaning. A comma takes the place of the missing words. Example: Sethoxydim controls grasses; 2,4-D, broadleaf weeds; glyphosate, both groups.

Commas set off clauses of concession (using “although”) or reason (using “because”). Example: Tillage killed the weeds, although there were few to kill.

Commas separate long independent clauses (each clause could stand alone as a complete sentence) that are joined by coordinating conjunctions such as “and” or “but.” Example: Part of the seed reached moist soil and germinated, but part remained ungerminated in dry soil. Short sentences may not require a comma. Example: The seed was planted and seedlings soon emerged. Such sentences may be troublesome, because it may be hard to decide whether to use a comma or not.

Commas separate a dependent clause (one that cannot stand alone as a complete sentence) from the main (independent) clause only when the dependent clause precedes the main clause. Example: When the soil is compacted, seedlings do not emerge well.

Words in apposition are commonly, but not always, set off with commas. Because the sentence is short and simple, commas are optional in this example: The parasitic weed, dodder, injures alfalfa. Because the sentence is complex, commas are not optional in this example: Dodder, a parasitic weed that attaches itself to stem tissue, injures alfalfa.

Introductory elements, such as prepositional phrases, are usually set off with commas. Example: From quackgrass, rhizomes penetrated 40 cm into surrounding soil. Without a comma, “quackgrass” would appear to

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be an adjective modifying “rhizomes.” Another example: Contrary to tradition, no-till farming does not use the plow.

In various situations, commas are needed for clarity or to avoid confusion. Example: Whenever you go, go quickly. Example: Once he understood, the reason was obvious.

Commas are sometimes used where they should not be used. A comma should not be used between the subject and the verb. This error frequently occurs when a comma is placed after the last item in a series. Incorrect: Pigweed, kochia, and green foxtail, were the major weeds. A comma should not be placed between a modifier and the word modified, unless the situation is parenthetical. Incorrect: He prepared a lengthy, detailed, report. Correct: He prepared a lengthy, though incomplete, report.

A comma should not be used between independent clauses not joined by a conjunction such as “and” or “but.” Incorrect: The herbicide was applied on time, the weeds continued to grow. Insert “but” to make the sentence correct. Incorrect: The report is well written, it is ready to publish. A semi-colon in place of the comma would correct this sentence.

A comma should not separate the parts of a compound predicate. Incorrect: The kochia emerged rapidly, and soon dominated the field.

Without mastering all the grammatical fine points, one can usually use commas effectively by simply inserting one if the sentence is easier to read and understand with than without a comma.

### Remember:

In effective composition,  
A comma can appear,  
In any situation,  
Where it makes the meaning clear.

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