In writing, commas serve as your connectors. They connect multiple independent clauses, items in a list, and independent clauses to modifiers. This handout outlines some of the most comma ways commas can be used in your writing.

Combining Independent Clauses

While our Sentence Basics handout provides a more detailed explanation of independent clauses, an independent clause is at its base a group of words that can stand alone as a complete sentence and conveys a complete thought. If you include two or more independent clauses in a single sentence, you would typically connect them using a coordinating conjunction (see our Conjunctions handout for more information on conjunctions). When you combine two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is used before the coordinating conjunction to indicate where one thought ends and the next thought begins.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey was having trouble understanding how to properly use commas, **so** she made an appointment at the Writing Center.”  “The Writing Lab is open for the semester, **and** the wait time is currently short.” |

# Items in a List

When listing three or more items, separating each item with a comma gives your reader a clear visual to know when one item in the list ends and the next item begins.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey’s favorite things to write about are dragons, magic, and cats.”  “Kelsey learned about commas, revised her creative writing assignment, and confidently submitted it before the deadline.” |

## Lists with Internal Commas

Sometimes the items in your list may contain what is called an “internal comma.” An internal comma is a comma that appears within a single list item—the most common are lists of cities and states, where each city and its corresponding state is a single item in the list. When you have internal commas, the overall list items will be separated with semicolons.

### Examples:

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| “The creative writing class wrote stories set in Tampa, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; and Seattle, Washington.”  “In her creative writing class, Kelsey wrote about a man who sailed across the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the Argentine Sea; a family who adopted a tiny, three-legged cat; and a mysterious, friendly ghost.” |

## Lists and the Oxford Comma

The Oxford comma refers specifically to the comma that comes before the coordinating conjunction in a list (before “and,” “or,” etc.). Including the Oxford comma can assist with clarity, identifying clearly for your reader when the items before and after the conjunction are part of a longer list. Unless you are limited by character count, including the Oxford comma is helpful for overall clarity in your writing.

## Lists of Adjectives

Adjectives are words that modify or describe a noun. Sometimes, you will want to use more than one adjective to describe a single noun. When this happens, separate each adjective that applies to the noun with a comma—this will indicate to your reader to thing of each adjective as a unique aspect of the noun.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey’s creative writing professor is a tall, blonde woman.”  “Kelsey writes stories that are short, funny, and realistic.” |

Sometimes, adjectives are combined with a noun to create a new, more specific noun. When this happens, omit the comma between the adjective and noun.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey writes short fiction novels.” (Here, “fiction” is being combined with “novels” to make the more specific noun “fiction novels.”) |

# Commas with Modifiers

Modifiers are pieces of additional information that tell us more about part or all of a sentence. Modifiers can be either “restrictive” or “non-restrictive” (sometimes called “essential” and “non-essential”).

## Non-Restrictive Modifiers

Non-restrictive modifiers provide additional information to a sentence, but they do not narrow the meaning of the independent clause(s) at the heart of the sentence. This type of information may provide additional context or knowledge for your reader, but if it were taken out of the sentence the overall meaning would not be lost. When you include non-restrictive modifiers, you offset them with commas to identify the additional information to your reader.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey, who had never been to France, wanted to write stories about fantasy creatures living in Paris.”  “The new book, which she had been warned was hard to out down, turned out to be a perfect distraction from her homework.” |

## Appositives

Appositives are a specific type of non-restrictive modifier that renames the subject of a sentence. These are the types of modifiers you might use to give your reader specifics who you are talking about or to link the subject of one sentence to where you discussed them in a previous sentence.

### Examples:

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| “The Writing Consultant, Evan, was looking forward to his classes starting in Spring.”  “Mathew Reyes, the author of the article, gives us an overview of the benefits of taking creative writing courses.” |

## Restrictive Modifiers

Restrictive modifiers provide additional information to a sentence that is essential for the core meaning of your independent clause. This information might seem like it should be offset with commas, but it should not be. This ensures that your reader clearly understands the complete meaning of your sentence.

### Examples:

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| “Kelsey took the creative writing class that was offered in the morning.”  “The Writing Consultant who loved fantasy stories was working on Mondays.” |

# Commas before Introductory Pieces

Introductory pieces are information included before an independent clause to provide additional context. This can include specifying a time frame or location, setting up a relationship to other information in a sentence or passage, or signifying a shift in stance (for example, offering a counterpoint to something stated in the previous sentence. Introductory pieces are followed by a comma to indicate to your reader where the core independent clause(s) of the sentence begin. The three introductory pieces you are most likely to use in your own writing are as follows

## Introductory clause

An introductory clause is a string of words that contain a subject and a verb.

### Examples:

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| “After visiting the Writing Lab, Kelsey will submit her creative writing assignment.”  “Even though the Writing Consultant lost their lucky pen, they were able to complete the paper on time.” |

## Introductory phrase

A introductory phrase is a string of words that without a subject and a verb.

### Examples:

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| “Despite the rain, all of the creative writing students managed to keep their papers dry.”  “Because of the holiday break, their professor gave the whole class an extension on their short stories.” |

## Lists with Internal Commas

An introductory word is a single word that appears before the independent clause.

### Examples:

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| “However, Kelsey still thought that she should finish the assignment early.”  “Therefore, every student should visit the Writing Lab before submitting their assignments!” |