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The Use of the Comma in English

Elements in a Series

We use the comma to separate elements in a series of three or more things. The comma before the conjunction ("*and*" or "*or*") is optional, but I recommend that you use it to avoid confusing the reader.

I like to eat apples, bananas, and oranges.

Do you like to read, watch TV, or play video games in your free time?

Two or More Coordinate Adjectives

The comma is used to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Coordinate adjectives are adjectives that have the same status. To determine if the adjectives are "coordinate adjectives," try to write the word "*and*" between the words or try to change the order of the words and see if the sentence still makes sense.

He is a funny, cheerful man.

They are coordinate adjectives because it makes sense if you change the order (He is a cheerful, funny man.), and you can connect the words with the word *and* (He is a funny and cheerful man.)

She is a little old lady.

These are not coordinate adjectives because you cannot change the order (~~She is an old little lady.~~), nor can you connect the adjectives with the word *and* (~~She is a little and old lady.~~)

Direct Quotes

A comma is used to separate a direct quote from the rest of the sentence if the quote is a complete sentence.

Jill said, "Let's go camping this weekend."

"Stop," the police officer shouted, "or I'll shoot."

He said that his mother was "the best mom in the world."

(A comma is not used because the quote is not a complete sentence.)

Two Independent Clauses

A comma and a conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) are used to connect two independent clauses. Independent clauses are parts of a sentence that could be independent sentences (they contain a subject and a verb).

He went to the store, but it was closed.

The two clauses could be independent sentences ("He went to the store." and "It was closed.")

He went to the store and bought fruit.

The two clauses could not be independent sentences ("He went to the store." is independent but "bought fruit" isn't independent. It doesn't have a subject.)

Introductory Elements

The comma is used to separate introductory elements from the rest of the sentence. Many introductory clauses begin with the words *after*, *although*, *as*, *because*, *if*, *since*, *when*, and *while*. Also, the words *yes*, *however*, and *well* are introductory.

If you go to New York, you need to see the Statue of Liberty.

Although it was sunny, the air was very cold.

Nonessential Elements

We use a comma to separate clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence (like the nonrestrictive clauses that we studied in the grammar lesson from lesson 14).

Laura, who is in my class, gave an outstanding presentation.

His goal, to learn English, is very important for his job.

Learning English, however, can take a long time.

Contrast Elements

The comma is used to separate elements that contrast with the sentence.

The car was red, not blue.

You didn't go to the party, did you?

Geographic Names, Dates, Titles

The comma is used to separate parts of a geographic name (for example, the name of the city from the name of the state or country).

He lives in San Francisco, California.

She visited Bogota, Colombia.

In the United States we use a comma to separate the month and day from the year. In Europe, however, they write the date with the day first and they do not use a comma.

June 23, 2012 (United States)
23 June 2012 (Europe)

A comma is used to separate a title from the name of a person.

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