

# Come On, Comma

It is often said that when you take a breath, add a comma. This advice often results in missing or excessive punctuation. Grammar can be intimidating, but knowing a few things will result in much stronger manuscripts. The following examples illustrate many of the proper uses of a comma as defined in The Chicago Manual of Style, 17<sup>th</sup> Ed. Hopefully, they will help you in ensuring your document is readable while keeping it simple.

In these examples, ✓ indicates correct punctuation, while ✗ indicates incorrect punctuation. Complete sentences are formatted like this, incomplete sentences like this.

Please note that the descriptions below are summarized for colloquial English and are not expressed in proper grammar terminology. For those seeking a comprehensive discussion, please see The Chicago Manual of Style, 17<sup>th</sup> Ed.

## Definition

For brevity, you will need to know what a conjunction is for this document. Conjunctions are words which join things together. Here are some examples: and, but, or, yet, because, though, although, unless, whether, so, therefore.

## Core Concepts

✓ If you have an introductory phrase, a comma must be added if it is followed by a complete sentence.

✓ Add a comma if you have a sentence followed by an incomplete sentence, even if you don't pause for breath.

✗ Some sentences are followed by a conjunction and an incomplete sentence without a comma before the conjunction.

✓ Two sentences separated by conjunctions should be punctuated, and the punctuation should be a comma before the conjunction.

NOTE: For two short sentences which are joined by one of those words, you may optionally exclude the comma. Both of the following are correct, but you may want to include the comma because you will never be wrong if you include it.

✓ He wanted ice cream but I wanted pizza.

✓ He wanted ice cream, but I wanted pizza.

✓ Commas must be placed around phrases inserted in the middle of a sentence, like this incomplete sentence, which add additional commentary to the sentence.

## Lists

✓ In a list, add a comma between each item: apples, bananas, and peaches.

There is an exception to the rule for lists which have commas within them. The exception allows separation of the items by a semi-colon *if it is needed for clarity*. Take this sentence as an example:

✓ Three people were at the meeting: John, the president; Mary, the vice president; and Omo, the secretary.

If we only used commas, there would be six people at the meeting instead of three.

The second-to-last item in a list may (then called the Oxford comma) or may not have a comma; it is your choice. However, your manuscript must be consistent, so choose your method and stick with it. Both are correct, depending on your choice:

✓ Today is the first day of the month, Wednesday, and my anniversary.

✓ Today is the first day of the month, Wednesday and my anniversary.

NOTE: My preference is to put a comma after each list item. This ensures your readers will always understand your intention. Consider this example:

? In my refrigerator, I have milk, cheese, a bowl of peaches and cream.

Do I have a bowl of peaches and a container of cream, or do I have a bowl of peaches and cream? If we used the Oxford comma, then it would be clear what is in the refrigerator.

## A Tricky Rule

Sometimes, we write sentences where the clauses have the same subject. Consider this example:

✓ Anton played games and went to the movies.

This sentence breaks into two sentences:

1) Anton played games.

2) Anton went to the movies.

The subject of both sentences is Anton, but he is not mentioned in the second sentence. In this case, a comma does not go before the conjunction most of the time. The one exception (coming from Strunk & White) is when the conjunction is *but*, which then requires the comma:

✓ Anton wanted to play games, but went to the movies.