

Five Common Comma Errors Explained and Corrected

A handout from the RSU English and Humanities' Writing Center

1. Missing Comma after an introductory element

- Determined to get the job done, we worked all weekend. **Correct!**
- Although the study was flawed, the results may still be useful. **Correct!**

Readers usually need a small pause—signaled by a comma—between an introductory word, phrase, or clause and the main part of the sentence. Use a comma after every introductory element. When the introductory element is very short, you don't always need a comma, but including it is never wrong.

2. Unnecessary comma

Before conjunctions in compound constructions that are not compound sentences.

- This conclusion applies to the United States, and to the rest of the world. **Incorrect!**

No comma is needed before *and* because it is joining two phrases that modify that same verb, *applies*.

With restrictive (or essential) elements.

- Many parents, of gifted children, do not want them to skip a grade. **Incorrect!**

No comma is needed to set off the restrictive (essential) phrase *of gifted children*, which is necessary to indicate which parents the sentence is talking about.

Do not use commas to set off restrictive (or essential) elements that are necessary to the meaning of the words they modify. Also, do not use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*) when the conjunction does not join parts of a compound sentence. Last, do not use a comma between a subject and verb, between a verb and its object or complement, or between a preposition and its object.

3. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive (or non-essential) element

- Marina, who was the president of the club, was first to speak. **Correct!**

The clause *who was the president of the club* does not affect the basic meaning of the sentence: Marina was first to speak.

A nonrestrictive element gives information not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. Use commas to set off a nonrestrictive element.

4. Missing comma in a compound sentence

- Meredith waited for Samir, and her sister grew impatient. **Correct!**

Without the comma, a reader may think at first that Meredith waited for both Samir and her sister.

A compound sentence consists of two or more parts that could each stand alone as a sentence. When the parts are joined by a coordinating conjunction, use a comma before the conjunction to indicate a pause between the two thoughts.

5. Comma Splice

- I was strongly attracted to her, she was beautiful and funny. **Incorrect!**
 - **Revised:** I was strongly attracted to her because she was beautiful and funny.
- We hated the meatloaf, the cafeteria served it every Friday. **Incorrect!**
 - **Revised:** We hated the meatloaf that the cafeteria served every Friday.

A comma splice occurs when only a comma separates clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence. To correct a comma splice, you can insert a semicolon or period, connect the clauses with a word such as *and* or *because*, or restructure the sentence.

Source: These explanations and examples were gathered from “The Top 20: A Quick Guide to Troubleshooting Your Writing” in *The Everyday Writer*, 4th edition, pages 3-11.