
When to Use Commas

This list covers some common reasons to use commas. There are others, but these are the ones that writers typically have trouble with.

Use commas to enclose

- nonrestrictive clauses (not essential to the meaning of the sentence; *which* clauses)
The register editor, *which is a fine piece of software*, configures registers.
- parenthetical elements
The ApBUILDER, *of course*, is a fine piece of software.
- appositives (phrases that identify another expression)
Our company, *Intel Corporation*, manufactures semiconductors.
- nonrestrictive participial phrases (a participle is a verb form that acts as an adjective)
Robin, *working efficiently*, finished the project early.

Use commas to separate

- independent clauses (those that could stand alone as complete sentences) linked by a coordinating conjunction (*and, or, nor, but, for, so, yet*)
The register editor configures registers, and the instruction editor composes code.
- contrasting ideas
We finished the project *on time*, but *over budget*.
- introductory elements
Since typos seem to creep into all of our work, it is wise to proofread everything twice.
During the development cycle, we read everything a million times and still miss typos.
- items in a series
Set the *YES bit, the MAYBE bit, or the NO bit*.
- adjectives describing the same noun or phrase
The article recommends using this *new, state-of-the-art, useful* software product.
- conjunctive adverbs (*however, nevertheless, therefore, consequently, thus, hence, besides, for example, on the other hand*) that join two independent clauses. A semicolon precedes a conjunctive adverb and a comma follows it.
Your idea is good; *however*, we can't afford to do it now.
Your idea is costly to implement; *consequently*, we can't do it.

When Not to Use Commas

The DON'Ts describe common pitfalls. (☛ represents a place where superfluous commas sometimes appear.)

Don't enclose

- restrictive clauses (essential to the sentence; *that* clauses)
The software☛ *that configures registers*☛ is the register editor.

Don't separate

- the two halves of a correlative conjunction (*not only ... but also, either ... or, neither ... nor, both ... and, whether ... or*)
The register editor *not only* configures registers☛ *but also* configures peripherals.
- two-element subjects
ApBUILDER☛ and *DemoBUILDER* boosted sales.
- two-element predicates (a predicate is a verb plus its object)
ApBUILDER boosted sales☛ and *increased profits*.
- two-element objects
ApBUILDER configures *the device registers*☛ and *the related peripherals*.
- a subject and its verb
The people who develop ApBUILDER☛ work long hours.
- a verb and its object
The manager reported☛ *that productivity had increased*.
- the subject from the rest of the sentence
To be able to finish ApBUILDER☛ is the goal of the team.
Working on the weekends☛ will help us do that.

When to Use a Semicolon

- To join independent clauses without a conjunction.
The register editor configures registers; the instruction editor writes code.
- To separate a transitional element (typically a conjunctive adverb) that joins two independent clauses. Use a semicolon before and a comma after the transitional element.
We proofread everything; *however*, we still miss some errors.
- To separate phrases or clauses in a series when one or more of the phrases or clauses contain commas.
ApBUILDER has online, hypertexted manuals; whizzy, useful design editors; and lots of other terrific features.

Note: The serial comma (the comma before the last item in a series) is often omitted in marketing and journalism materials.

References: Brusaw, Charles T., Gerald J. Alred, and Walter E. Oliu, *Handbook of Technical Writing*, 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982
A Manual of Style. 13th ed., rev. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
Alley, Michael, *The Craft of Scientific Writing*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.