

INTRODUCTION

While you were working on *The Case of the Internet Plagiarist*, you must have noticed that the **comma**, a very important punctuation mark, was used in a number of situations in the text and video scripts of the different parts of the case.

Learning how to use this punctuation mark properly is an important step on your way to improve your writing style, since **commas** can help you express yourself more clearly by indicating a separation of ideas or of elements in a sentence.

That's why, in this lesson, we are going to take a closer look at the most common cases in which the **comma** is used.

THE COMMA

1. The comma is used to separate independent clauses joined by conjunctions (*and*, *but*, etc.).

The good part of your manuscript isn't original, **and** the original part isn't good.

(from this lesson — saying attributed to Dr. Samuel Johnson)

The class quickly hushed up, **but** the air remained thick with anticipation.

(from this lesson)

The **comma may be omitted** in sentences consisting of **two short independent clauses**:

The question is easy (,) **but** the answer is not.

2. The comma is used to separate words, phrases, and clauses that are part of a series of three or more items.

I've got a lot of deadlines, papers, and exams.

(from this lesson)

If you want, you can **omit the final comma** before the word *and* in a series of words as long as it **doesn't affect the meaning** of the sentence.

I've got a lot of deadlines, papers *and* exams.

Sometimes, however, the absence of that final comma might result in an ambiguous sentence, as in the second example below.

He created a new file using the cut, copy, and paste commands.

He created a new file using the cut, copy and paste commands.

In the first sentence, the use of the final comma makes it clear for the reader that “copy” and “paste” are two different commands.

In the second sentence, the omission of the final comma might lead the reader to the erroneous conclusion that “copy and paste” is only one command.

The **final comma is**, therefore, **not usually omitted** in cases such as the one we saw above. **Neither is it omitted before** the word *and* in a **series of phrases or clauses**, as in the following example.

I expect an email by 5 p.m. telling me what you did, how you did it, *and* why you did it.

(from this lesson)

- 3.** The comma is used after words of direct address and connectives (*however, nevertheless, still, after all*, etc.) used to introduce a sentence.

Mike, I'm overwhelmed with work this semester.

(from this lesson)

When Michael Jr. handed in the paper, he felt the mission had been successfully accomplished. *After all*, he had safely covered up his tracks.

(from this lesson)

Also, **words of direct address** and **connectives** are usually placed **between commas** when they appear in the middle of a sentence.

Michael Sr.: I'll have your hide for this, Mr. Crane, I swear.
(from this lesson)

Michael's father eventually pulled enough strings to have the case dismissed. He did not, however, manage to have Crane fired.
(from this lesson)

4. Nonessential words, phrases, or clauses are normally placed between commas.

While many of you handed in original work for the midterm assignment, some of you, *and I believe you know who you are*, have committed blatant plagiarism.
(from this lesson)

The board decided that for first-time offenders, *which included Michael Jr. and some of his classmates*, the best course of action would be a make-up paper for all.
(from this lesson)

As you can see, the italicized parts above are **not essential** to the basic meaning of each sentence and, therefore, are placed between commas. If you omit these italicized parts, the sentences will still make sense.

5. The comma is used to separate items in dates and geographical locations.

He was born on March 3, 2012.

They live in Juneau, Alaska.

6. The comma is used after salutations or closings in letters.

Dear Dad,

With all my love,

Although comma usage may vary according to each writer's personal style, if you follow the basic rules presented in this lesson, you should have no trouble expressing your ideas in a clear way so that your reader can easily figure out which words go together in a sentence and which parts of your sentences are most important.