

* COMMA-TOSE (Using Commas) *

"Do I need a COMMA here? . . ."

YES: RULE 1a:

S+P, {and} S + P.

A COMMA comes BEFORE the CONJUNCTION that links the two INDEPENDENT CLAUSES ("S+P"s) of a COMPOUND SENTENCE.

The Small Print: A compound sentence is made up of TWO Noun+Verb clauses that could stand as complete sentences themselves; these are combined in a compound sentence with a conjunction like "and" or "but": put a comma before that little word.

Example: *Jimmy wrote a letter of love to Mary, and he soaked the envelope in Mennen's Skin Bracer.*

NO: RULE 1b:

S+P {and} P.

NO COMMA comes before the conjunction linking a COMPOUND PREDICATE.

A compound predicate consists of TWO predicates (main verb phrases) with ONE subject (main noun phrase); these predicates are linked, too, by a conjunction—but in this case, NO comma.

Example: *Jimmy wrote a letter of love to Mary and soaked the envelope in Mennen's Skin Bracer.*

EXCEPTION to Rule 1a (which you can safely ignore!): a compound sentence whose clauses are "very SHORT" does NOT require a comma; e.g.:

Jimmy spoke of love and Mary laughed at him. . . . comma optional

YES: RULE 2:

X, S+P.

A COMMA should come AFTER all of the following INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES & PHRASES:

Don't worry about the fancy grammar terms; the gist is that all such introductory stuff needs to be set off from the main clause (the "S+P") of the sentence by a comma.

i) ADVERBIAL CLAUSE:

When he wrote his first letter of love, a tear came to Jimmy's eye.

ii) PARTICIPIAL PHRASE:

Writing love letter after love letter, Jimmy developed cramps in more places than one.

iii) PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE:

In a momentary fit of white-rage madness, Jimmy tore up letter #37, vowing never to send it.

[NOTICE that clauses and phrases that come AFTER the main clause are also set off by a comma, IF they entail a "break" in grammar/meaning.]

iv) Single-word introductory TRANSITIONAL or INTERJECTIVE expressions (whew!), such as "however," "therefore"; "first," "next"; "yes," "no," "well," etc.:

Yes, Jimmy did sense the ridiculous nature of his infatuation. However, this insight did not deter him in the least.

Rule 2 **EXCEPTION**, of course (which, again, you can safely ignore!): The comma MAY be omitted after BRIEF clauses and phrases, especially short PREPOSITIONAL phrases, IF no misreading can occur; e.g.:

In two weeks Jimmy will have saved up enough money for another bottle of Mennen's Skin Bracer, and then he can write another letter to Mary.

The comma is optional in the example above; BUT....

For a second, time stood still!

Here a misreading IS possible, so the comma is again mandatory.

YES: RULE 3:

S, X, P.

A COMMA comes BEFORE and AFTER interruptive PARENTHETICAL & TRANSITIONAL elements:

True love, in Jimmy's opinion, was worth waiting for.

Suppose, for example, that you were in Jimmy's shoes!

We must always bear in mind that Jimmy, too, is a human being.

Jimmy's parents, as most of you know, voted for Perot, in a fit of anti-Washington anger.

[Note again the comma AFTER the main clause in the last example, setting off, in this case, an "extra" prepositional phrase.]

YES: RULE 4:

X, Y, and Z

A COMMA should follow all items but the last in a SERIES of THREE or more items.

Observe this rule whether such a list/series is made up of single WORDS or multi-word PHRASES. Diatribe: This rule has been viciously attacked by some newfangled grammarians, who claim that you only need the last ("Y,") comma to distinguish the "X,Y, and Z" list from an appositive ("X, a and b"). But who wants to have to worry about that!? "Last night I heard several goatsuckers, three nightjars and a whippoorwill." Hmmm: is a whippoorwill a type of goatsucker, or are these three different kinds of birds? Following the original rule would end all such dilemmas.

Jimmy had decorated his desk with a package of lavender stationery, a picture of Mary in a tin-metal frame, and an economy-sized bottle of Mennen's Skin Bracer. He felt happy, proud, and self-fulfilled.

YES: RULE 5a:

adj, adj noun

COORDINATE ADJECTIVES need to be separated by a **COMMA**.

Coordinate adjectives are two (or more) adjectives before a noun, **BOTH** of which modify the noun itself ("loud, dirty bird"). As a test, such adjectives can be **INTERCHANGED** (dirty, loud bird") or have an "AND" put between them ("loud and dirty bird").

Jimmy blew Mary a kiss with a pucker of his lips and an absurd flick of his grease-soaked, ink-stained fingers.

You could write "ink-stained, grease-soaked fingers" or "grease-soaked and ink-stained fingers": therefore "grease-soaked" and "ink-stained" are coordinate adjectives and need a comma between 'em.

NO: RULE 5b:

adj->adj+noun

CUMULATIVE ADJECTIVES do **NOT** take a comma, since the first adjective is really modifying the second-adjective-&-noun "unit" (a noun phrase, really).

As a test, such adjectives **CANNOT** be interchanged or have an "AND" inserted between them: thus "dirty love bird" cannot be changed to "love dirty bird" or "dirty and love bird" without creating grammatical gibberish!

*Mary lived in a large brick house. . . . no comma, 'cuz—
Mary lived in a brick large house. ????
Mary lived in a large and brick house. ????*

YES: RULE 6a:

, which . . .

NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES & PHRASES are set off by a comma or commas.

Nonrestrictive clauses & phrases are stuff **NOT** essential to the general intent of the sentence and could be omitted without changing the sentence's main gist. They have an "oh-by-the-way" relationship to the main point.

- i) "WHICH" CLAUSE: *To forget Mary, Jimmy drank a case of Hy-Vee cola, **which** was cheap and could be guzzled quickly.*
- ii) PHRASE: *Jimmy's strange nine-page letter, reeking of Mennen's Skin Bracer, made Mary consider moving to another city.*

NO: RULE 6b:

that . . .

RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES & PHRASES are **NOT** set off by a comma or commas.

Restrictive clauses & phrases are **ESSENTIAL** to the sentence's meaning:

- i) "THAT" CLAUSE: *To forget Mary, Jimmy wanted to drink something **that** was cheap and could be guzzled quickly.*
- ii) PHRASE: *A letter reeking of Mennen's Skin Bracer made Mary consider moving to another city.*

In the **NONRESTRICTIVE** examples, the material regarding the cola and aftershave are merely "extra" information, however interesting; in the **RESTRICTIVE** examples that follow, the same info is now crucial to these sentences' meaning. Note also that such a distinction determines whether you should use "WHICH" or "THAT"!

—Are yu' Comma-tose yet? . . .