



UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH
ASK - ACADEMIC
SKILLS UNIT

Commas.

Many people are unsure of how to use commas. This simple guide and examples should help you to make the right decision.

Misused commas can confuse the reader, cause a sentence to be meaningless or change the meaning of the sentence to something which you do not intend to say.

Therefore, you should pay attention to placing the commas correctly to ensure accuracy and prevent confusion for the reader.

This handout has four main sections.

1. Using commas to divide items in a list.
2. Using commas after introductory phrases in sentences.
3. Using commas in complex sentences, and
4. Additional usages: adding strongly-related information and bringing in a linked point.

Using commas to divide items in a list.

The usual rule is that there is no comma before the final item in the list, so another word is used instead of the comma. In most instances, that word will be either “*and*” or “*or*”.

Example:

Their essays focused on healthcare, therapy, nursing *and* rehabilitation.

Beware of extra “ands”.

Sometimes an item within a list might include an “and”. This will mean using an extra comma, known as the Oxford comma, in order to give the exact meaning for the reader.

Example:

The sandwiches we wish to order today are cheese salad, egg and tomato, and ham.

The second comma is needed to separate out “egg and tomato” as fillings for one sandwich. Otherwise, it would be unclear whether the customer wants one with egg and the other with tomato and ham, one with egg and tomato and the other with ham, or one with egg, one with tomato and one with ham.

Using commas after introductory phrases in sentences.

An introductory word or phrase can be used to signal the continuation of a point, a change in direction or to emphasise an author. Most of these phrases need a comma after them to show where the main part of the sentence begins. The word or phrase before the comma can be helpful for the logic and flow of the text, but it could be removed without losing the meaning or the point which is being made.

Three examples of continuation:

1. In addition, it is essential to drink plenty of water.
2. Consequently, dehydration can be avoided.
3. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the ambient temperature.

Two examples of a change in direction:

1. However, drinking too much water can overwhelm the kidneys.
2. Having considered the need to drink enough water, it is important to consider the effects of drinking too much water on health.

Example of emphasising an author:

According to Smith (2013), students prefer to attend lectures later in the day.

Using commas in complex sentences.

Complex sentences have two parts which are called *clauses*:

1. An independent clause, which could exist by itself, and
2. A dependent clause, which needs the independent clause in order to make sense.

The clauses are linked by a specific type of *connector*, which can be a word or a phrase.

Examples of connectors: *although, even though, whereas, while, if, unless.*

1. Independent clauses.

If an independent clause comes first, you do not use a comma. In the following example, the first part stands alone as a complete sentence.

Example:

I am going to the theatre tonight although the exams start tomorrow.

2. Dependent Clauses.

If a dependent clause comes first, it is always followed by a comma. In the following example, the first part does not make sense without the second part.

Example:

Although the exams start tomorrow, I am going to the theatre tonight.

Two Additional Usages.

1. Adding strongly-related information to shorter sentences

This information could be removed without the sentence losing its meaning or the topic.

Example:

Carl Jung, who was originally seen as a protégé by Freud, is known for his work on archetypes and how they influence human behaviour.

2. Bringing in a linked point

We often use words such as *which, who* and *where* to bring in a linked point. These are known as relative pronouns. The clauses either side can stand alone and make sense.

Example:

English is what is known as a dense language, where meaning is often conveyed in fewer words than in a Latin-based language.

If you would like an ASK tutorial, please contact us:

Email: academicskills@port.ac.uk.

Phone: 02392 843462.

Visit: Third Floor, Nuffield Building.

Resource revised 2019.



UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH
ASK - ACADEMIC
SKILLS UNIT