

Commas: Five Easy Rules

The general guidelines below should be all you need to make the right comma choices in most situations...

1. Use a comma to avoid confusion in meaning.

Not this: "When he ate my cousin was happy." But this: "When he ate, my cousin was happy."

2. If the extra clause in a sentence comes first, you should use a comma. You should not use a comma if a main clause comes first.

Sample sentence: "While plans were in progress, they considered every step available."

The main clause is this sample sentence could be a complete sentence by itself (e.g., "They considered every step available.") The extra clause is the part of the sentence that is not a complete sentence (e.g., "While plans were in progress...")

To test this, try the "stare test." Walk up to someone and watch their reaction when you say, "while plans were in progress." If they stare at you while they wait for you to finish your sentence, then you have an extra clause.

Another way to test this is to turn the sentences into questions without deleting any words. The main clause is easy: "Did they consider every step available?" But the extra clause isn't: "Did they while plans were in progress?"

Another way is to see if the clauses can fit into the frame sentence, "He refused to believe the fact that ____." The main clause will fit: "He refused to believe the fact that they considered every step available." The extra clause will not fit: "He refused to believe the fact that while plans were in progress."

3. Use a comma if your sentence is actually two sentences hooked together by the "Conjunction Junction" words.

These words are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*, and can be remembered by the acronym "*fanboys*."

4. Put commas around nonessential elements of your sentence.

How can you tell if an element is nonessential? Two ways:

- a. You can move it around without changing the meaning of the sentence.

"Certain words, of course, can be placed almost anywhere in a sentence."

"Of course, certain words can be placed almost anywhere in a sentence."

- b. You can remove it from the sentence and you still know what the sentence is about.

"My friend, who likes to read, said that movie was her favorite."

If you can tell which friend you mean without the "who likes to read" part, put commas around it. But if you need the "who likes to read" part in order to figure out *which* friend, take the commas out:

"My friend who likes to read said that movie was her favorite."

5. Don't use a comma to separate a subject from a verb or an object from a preposition.

Not: "Bob, took me out to dinner last night." But: "Bob took me out to dinner last night."

Not: "She sang with, two guitarists and a drummer." But: "She sang with two guitarists and a drummer."