



## The Writer's Toolbox September 2008

Good Morning Everyone!

Welcome back for another year of the Writer's Toolbox. Because I am a grammarian, I can't help noticing the kinds of grammatical and mechanical problems which appear in the letters and emails which I receive. Over the summer, I have saved several of these which exhibited a pattern of difficulties, so I would like to start off our year of discussions with a review of these common problems which plague all of us.

Not surprisingly, most of these issues involve punctuation, especially commas; therefore, we will begin today with one more review of the basic rules of comma usage. I am drawing for this discussion from a new handbook which the Writing and Learning Center has recently adopted called *A Writer's Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research*, Second Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2008).

There are five basic rules for the use of commas in English:

**1. Use a comma after an introductory word group that is *not* the subject of the sentence.**

Like an overture, an introductory word group must be distinct from, yet clearly attached to, what follows. A comma both attaches an introductory word, phrase, or clause to and distinguishes it from the rest of the sentence.

Finally, the car careened to the right, endangering passers-by.

Reflecting on her life experiences, Washburn attributed her successes to her own efforts.

Until he noticed the handprint on the wall, the detective was frustrated by the lack of clues.

Do not add a comma after a word group that functions as the subject of the sentence. Be especially careful with word groups that begin with *-ing* words.

Persuading constituents \_ is one of a politician's most important tasks.

## 2. Use commas between items in a series.

A comma should appear after each item in a series.

Three industries that have been important to New England are shipbuilding, tourism, and commercial fishing.

*Commas in Journalism* Magazines and newspapers leave out the final comma that precedes *and* in a series.

## 3. Use a comma in front of a coordinating conjunction (such as *and* or *but*) that joins two independent clauses.

When a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) is used to join clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence, put a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Injuries were so frequent that he began to worry, and his style of play became more cautious.

If the word groups you are joining are not independent clauses, do not add a comma.

## 4. Add a comma between coordinate adjectives, unless they are joined by *and*, but do not separate cumulative adjectives with a comma.

Use a comma between **coordinate** adjectives that precede a noun and modify it independently (*a brave, intelligent, persistent woman*). Adjectives are coordinate if they can be joined by *and* (*brave and intelligent and persistent*) or if their order can be changed (*a persistent, brave, intelligent woman*).

This brave, intelligent, persistent woman was the first female to earn a Ph.D. in psychology.

If you cannot add *and* between the adjectives or change their order, they are **cumulative**, with each one modifying the ones that follow it, and should not be separated with a comma or commas.

Andrea Bocelli, the world-famous Italian tenor, has performed in concerts and operas.

*World-famous* modifies *Italian tenor*, not just the noun *tenor*. You could not add *and* between the adjectives (*world-famous and Italian tenor*) or change their order (*Italian world-famous tenor*).

**5. Use commas to set off nonessential additions to a sentence, but do not set off essential words or word groups with commas.**

Nonessential, or **nonrestrictive**, words, phrases, and clauses add information to a sentence but are not required for its basic meaning to be understood. Nonrestrictive additions are set off with commas.

**Nonrestrictive**

Mary Shelley's best-known novel, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, was first published in 1818.

The sentence would have the same basic meaning without the title (*Mary Shelley's best-known novel was first published in 1818*).

**Restrictive** words, phrases, and clauses are essential for a sentence because they identify exactly who or what the writer is talking about. Restrictive additions are not set off with commas.

**Restrictive**

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* was first published in 1818.

Without the title the reader would not know which novel the sentence is referring to, so *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* is restrictive.

Often, the context determines whether to enclose a word, phrase, or clause with commas. In the following examples, notice how a preceding sentence can affect the meaning and determine whether commas are needed:

Two customers with angry looks on their faces approached the check-out counter. The customers, demanding a refund, lined up by the register.

The store opened at the usual time. The customers demanding a refund lined up by the register.

Three types of additions to sentences often cause problems: adjective clauses, adjective phrases, and appositives.

**1. Adjective clauses**

Adjective clauses include a subject and a verb, but they do not function independently. They begin with a relative pronoun or an adverb—*who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, *that*, *where*, or *when*—and modify a noun or pronoun within the sentence by telling *how many*, *what kind*, or *which one*. Adjective clauses can be either nonrestrictive or restrictive.

### **Nonrestrictive**

With his tale of Odysseus, *whose journey can be traced on modern maps*, Homer brought accounts of alien and strange creatures to the ancient Greeks.

### **Restrictive**

The contestant *whom he most wanted to beat* was his father.

## **2. Adjective phrases**

Like an adjective clause, an adjective phrase also modifies a noun or pronoun in a sentence. Adjective phrases begin with a preposition (for example, *with*, *by*, *at*, or *for*) or a verbal (a word formed from a verb that can have various functions within a sentence). Adjective phrases can be either nonrestrictive or restrictive.

### **Nonrestrictive**

Some people, *by their faith in human nature or their general good will*, bring out the best in others.

The phrase does not specify which people are being discussed. The sentence would have the same meaning without it (*Some people bring out the best in others*).

### **Restrictive**

People *fighting passionately for their rights* can inspire others to join a cause.

The phrase indicates which people the writer is talking about and therefore is restrictive. It is not set off with commas.

## **3. Appositives**

Appositives are nouns or noun phrases that rename nouns or pronouns and appear right after the word they rename.

### **Nonrestrictive**

One researcher, *the widely respected R. S. Smith*, has shown that a child's performance on I.Q. tests can be very inconsistent.

Because the word *one* already restricts the word *researcher*, the researcher's name is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

### **Restrictive**

The researcher *R. S. Smith* has shown that a child's performance on I.Q. tests is not reliable.

The name *R. S. Smith* tells readers which researcher is meant.

And there you have the rules covering the five most common uses of commas in English. Of course, there are other rules covering other uses of commas, and we will cover those

in the Writer's Toolbox next month. We will then move on to other marks of punctuation such as semicolons and colons, apostrophes, hyphens, and quotation marks.

*“Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.” – Chinese Proverb*