

THREE MAJOR COMMA RULES

There are many comma rules that writers can use to help them correctly punctuate their writing, but three are the most useful and most commonly used.

Up to 70% of your comma usage can be covered by the following three rules:

Rule #1:

Use a comma between two independent clauses joined by a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet). An independent clause is a clause (a group of words) that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

Sample sentence: "The man was a thief, but he could not steal her heart."

In this example, "was" is the verb in the first independent clause, "The man" is the subject, and "a thief" is the completed thought. In the second independent clause, "could not steal" is the verb, "he" is the subject, and "her heart" is the completed thought.

Because we have two independent clauses joined by a conjunction ("but"), we put a comma between the two clauses.

Rule #2:

Use a comma after an introductory dependent clause followed by an independent clause. A dependent clause is a clause that cannot stand alone as a complete sentence.

Sample sentence: "Before he became President, he was a pollster for the Gallup Poll."

In this sentence, the first clause is a dependent clause because it begins with a dependent clause word "Before"; therefore, the first clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. The second clause is an independent clause: "was" is the verb, "he" is the subject, and "a pollster for the Gallup Poll" is the completed thought; this second clause can stand alone as a complete sentence.

Because we have an introductory dependent clause followed by an independent clause, we join them with a comma.

Rule #3:

Use a comma to join three or more items in a list. Using a comma before the last item in the list is recommended.

Sample sentence: "After five days of hiking, he reached the center of the Nature Preserve, but he forgot to bring his tent, sleeping bag, and provisions."

This sentence uses all the comma rules mentioned above.

The first clause is a dependent clause because it begins with a dependent clause word "After"; therefore, the first clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. The second clause is an independent clause: "reached" is the verb, "he" is the subject, and "the center of the Nature Preserve" is the completed thought; this second clause can stand alone as a complete sentence.

Because we have an introductory dependent clause followed by an independent clause, we join these first two clauses with a comma.

The third clause is an independent clause: "forgot" is the verb, "he" is the subject, and "to bring his tent, sleeping bag, and provisions" is the completed thought; this third clause can stand alone as a complete sentence, so we join it with the first two clauses using a comma as per rule #1 (in this case, the first two clauses together act as a complete sentence, and they are joined to the third clause with the conjunction "but," so we can apply this rule).

Finally, since there are three items in the list at the end of the sentence, we join them with commas, as indicated.

For more on Independent and Dependent Clauses, see the "Writing: Tools & Strategies" forum at <http://www.iDiscourse.com>. Also, for more on these particular comma rules, and others, see Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual*.

