



Connors Writing Center

7 Hamilton Smith Hall • UNH • writing@unh.edu • 862-3272

Proofreading for Commas

Compound sentence commas

1. Skim your paper, looking only for the seven coordinating conjunctions: and, nor, but, so, for, or, yet.
2. Stop at each of these words to see whether there is an independent clause (a complete sentence) on both sides of it.
3. If so, place a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

She wanted to buy a new car, but she didn't have enough money to do so.
The wind blew fiercely, and the rain poured down.

Disruptive commas between compound verbs or objects

1. Skim your paper, stopping only at the coordinating conjunctions.
2. Check to see if there is an independent clause (sentence) on both sides of the conjunction. If so, place a comma before the conjunction. If not, do not place a comma before the conjunction.

disruptive comma: They bought two pizzas, but ate only one.
correct: They bought two pizzas but ate only one.

Disruptive commas between subjects and verbs

1. Find the subject and verb in each of your sentences.
2. Make sure that you have not separated the subject from the verb with one comma.

disruptive: That man sitting in the train station, is the person I'm supposed to meet.
correct: That man sitting in the train station is the person I'm supposed to meet.

Comma splices

1. Skim your paper, stopping at every comma.
2. Determine whether you have an independent clause on both sides of the comma.
3. If so, change the sentence in one of the following ways:
 - reword the sentence to change one clause into a subordinate (or dependent) clause
 - add a coordinating conjunction after the comma
 - replace the comma with a semicolon

comma splice: Americans speak too rapidly, this is a common complaint by foreign visitors.
correct: Americans speak too rapidly; this is a common complaint by foreign visitors.
correct: Foreign visitors commonly complain that Americans speak too rapidly.

Introductory commas after dependent clauses

1. Skim your paper, looking only at the first two or three words of each sentence. Stop if one of these words is a dependent marker such as while, because, when, if, after, etc.

2. If necessary, place a comma at the end of the introductory dependent clause.

While I was writing, the phone rang.
Because the weather was bad, we decided to cancel our planned picnic.

Other introductory commas

1. Skim your paper, looking only at the first word or two of each sentence.
2. Stop if the word or phrase
 - ends in –ing (gerund)
 - is an infinitive (to + verb)
 - is an introductory word (well, yes, moreover, etc.)
3. Place a comma at the end of the introductory phrase.

To get a good grade, you must turn in all your homework.
Walking to work, Jim stopped for coffee at the diner.
Yes, I agree that the exam was difficult.

Other introductory commas (continued)

If the sentence begins with a prepositional phrase (a phrase beginning with in, at, on, between, with, etc.), place a comma after the prepositional phrase if it is longer than three words or suggests a distinct pause before the main clause.

In those days we wrote with a pen and paper.
Across the street from the library, an old man waited for a bus.

Series commas

1. Skim your paper, stopping at the conjunctions.
2. Check to see if these conjunctions link words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.
3. If so, place commas after each word, phrase, or clause in the series (except the last one).

Dieters should avoid eggs, meat, and tropical oils.

Commas with nonessential elements

1. Skim your paper, looking for a phrase or clause in each sentence that explains or gives more information about a word or phrase that comes before it.
2. If you can delete the phrase or clause and still keep the meaning, the phrase or clause is probably nonessential and needs two commas, one before and one after.
3. As an alternative test for a nonessential phrase or clause, try saying “by the way” before it. If that seems appropriate to the meaning, the phrase or clause is probably nonessential. In the first example, the clause *who cheat* is essential; in the second, the clause *who often cheats* is nonessential.
4. Non-essential elements are often “which” or “that” clauses. In the first example, “who cheat” tells us which students. In the second example, we already know which student (Fred).

Students who cheat only harm themselves. Fred, who often cheats, is just harming himself.