Six Steps to Correct Commas: Achieving Punctuation Peace of Mind

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When I taught, I wished my students would love commas as much as I do. My husband, ever the realist, pointed out that all I could hope to achieve was to make my students hate commas less, since they probably didn’t spend their Saturday afternoons enjoying grammar guides. Lowering my expectations, I set out to create a way to prevent my students from cringing when I informed them that they would have to comb over each sentence in their assignments to ensure they had used commas correctly.

The result was six simple steps to correct commas. These steps ensure that your meaning will be clear to the readers the first time they read a sentence and that your sentence will have the commas your educated readers expect. Work through all six simple steps and your readers will be impressed by your mastery of commas, even if you missed the comma class in law school. You may even find yourself loving them!

Step one: independent clauses

Ask yourself if your sentence has one or two independent clauses. (Remember, an independent clause could serve as a complete sentence.) If you find that you have two independent clauses smashed into one sentence, you can correctly join them with a comma so long as you also use a coordinating conjunction. A quick way to remember the seven coordinating conjunctions is FANBOYS. This mnemonic stands for “For,” “And,” “Nor,” “But,” “Or,” “Yet,” and “So.” If you have two independent clauses and a FANBOYS, place a comma before the FANBOYS and you will be well on your way to a perfectly punctuated document. For example, “The associate wrote a correctly punctuated memo and pleased the partner” does not need a comma before the “and” because “pleased the partner” is not a complete sentence. (If you really don’t want to use a comma and a FANBOYS, you can still correctly punctuate these two clauses. First, you can turn each independent clause into one sentence, so what once was one sentence becomes two sentences. Next, if the clauses are closely related, you can create one sentence by joining the independent clauses with a semicolon, but don’t also include a FANBOYS. For instance, “The associate wrote a correctly punctuated memo; the partner was impressed.”)

Step two: clarification

Step Two ensures that your sentence will be clear and have the meaning you intended. To do this, ask yourself three simple questions. First, would your readers understand your meaning the first time without a comma? If the answer is no, you should add a comma to prevent a possible misreading. For instance, suppose you wrote “Those who can usually walk.” Did you mean “Those who can, usually walk”? Or did you forget to complete your thought: “Those who can usually walk the trail could not that day because of the torrential rain”? Either way, you need something more to help the readers understand your meaning on their first reading.

Second, does your sentence have an introduction of four or more words? If so, set that introduction off with a comma. This comma will help ensure that your readers know when the real heart of the sentence starts. Trust me – all busy readers appreciate knowing when they have to start really paying attention!

Finally, does your sentence contain information that is helpful, but that doesn’t affect its meaning? This rule can be somewhat tricky because whether or not you need to use commas can depend on the context. To figure this out, read the sentence without the information. If the meaning remains the same, you should point that out to your readers by surrounding the extra, helpful information with commas. For instance, does the sentence “My sister Tiana just finished school” need commas around Tiana? To determine that, you need to know whether Tiana is my only sister. She isn’t, so taking her name out of the sentence makes it ambiguous. “My sister just finished school” leaves you wondering which sister. Therefore, when you add the clarifying name of my well-schooled sister, you should not use commas around her name. On the other hand, the sentence “My sisters, Amanda and Tiana, are coming to visit next month” must have the commas because they are my only sisters. The
sentence would have the same meaning without including their names.

**Step three: contrasts, transitions, and interruptions**

Step Two had three easy questions, and Step Three has two simple questions. First, ask yourself if your sentence contains a phrase of contrast. Phrases of contrast are set off from the rest of the sentence, so you should make sure to surround that contrasting information with commas. For instance: The professor, not the students, loved commas.

Next, does your sentence have a transition or interrupting word? Like phrases of contrast, transitions and interrupters are set off with commas. Remember that dates, addresses, and geographic locations are frequently used as transitions, so make sure those are correct. For “October 25, 2011,” style dates, use two commas: one after the day and one after the year. For addresses, use a comma after every element of the address, but remember that state and zip code are one element. Likewise, for geographic locations, use a comma after every element. Therefore, if a transition comes at the beginning or in the middle of your sentence, you will always have a comma after the last element.

Whew! You’re halfway through making sure your commas are correct. I promise the hard part is behind you. Can you feel yourself beginning to love commas?

**Step four: modifiers**

You need to make sure that your modifiers are correctly punctuated. Ask yourself if your sentence contains two or more adjectives before a noun. Then, ask yourself if those adjectives modify the noun but aren’t joined by an “and.” (If you aren’t sure whether both modify the noun, reverse their order; if your sentence still makes sense, then both adjectives modify the noun.) For example, “I love long, peaceful walks in the hills” needs a comma between long and peaceful because they both modify walks. The sentence would still make sense if you reversed their order, “I love peaceful, long walks in the hills.”

**Step five: lists**

If your sentence doesn’t have a list, just skip ahead to Step Six. If you see a list before you, ask yourself whether it’s a complex list. If each item in your list contains helpful, extra information that you have already set off with commas, you need to help the reader by changing up the punctuation. Use semicolons to separate the items. If you have a simple list — one without internal commas — stick with commas. But remember, whether you need to separate the items with commas or semicolons, you must separate every item — put that punctuation mark after the second-to-last item!

**Step six: quotations**

And for the grand finale: Use this step when you quote text from another source. If the quotation needs a comma after it to fit grammatically in the sentence make sure you put the comma inside of the closing quotation marks. “This court holds you in contempt of commas,” the judge said.

**Conclusion**

So you see creating a document with correct commas is really just a matter of walking through six simple steps. I bet you hate commas a little less now!

**Source:** Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer (3d ed. 2009).


**About the Author**

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a member of Smith, Fordyce-Ruff & Penny, PLLC. She clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court and taught Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing at the University of Oregon School of Law. She is also the author of Idaho Legal Research, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at tfordyce-ruff@sfrplaw.com.