# Comma Usage

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While grammar books often contain long lists of comma rules, it's more helpful to think of the comma as only ever performing one single function: **the comma separates different parts of a sentence from one another.**

All the comma rules in the books, then, come from all the different possible parts of sentences.

## • Joining Independent Clauses •

Sentences must be made up of subject-verb cores and not rely on anything else to convey a complete idea. In other words, a sentence must have an **independent clause** at its core (see INDEPENDENT AND DEPENDENT CLAUSES Handout for more detail).

If a sentence contains two independent clauses, they can be joined in a couple different ways:

I was hungry. I didn't want the noodles in the fridge.

(Two independent clauses)

I was hungry**, but** I didn't want the noodles in the fridge.

(Comma + coordinating conjunction)

Our two independent clauses are, **I was hungry**, and **I didn't want the noodles in the fridge**. Each of these could just as easily stand on its own, so to join the two independent clauses, one strategy is to use the comma plus a **coordinating conjunction**.

The conjunctions that give both clauses equal weight—again, the coordinating conjunctions—are often taught in a list, as the acronym FANBOYS:

**F**or, **A**nd, **N**or, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, **S**o.

Note that when two independent clauses are being joined, a comma alone isn't strong enough to connect them. The comma must be paired with a coordinating conjunction, or else a stronger punctuation must be used, like a period (as in the first example above) or sometimes a semicolon, which functions almost exactly like a period.

If only a comma is used, this is called a **comma splice error** and should be corrected:

I was hungry, I didn't want the noodles in the fridge. (Comma splice error)

I was hungry; I didn't want the noodles in the fridge. (Semicolon)

# • Joining Other Stuff to Independent Clauses •

The reason that independent clauses require coordinating conjunctions is that, being of equal weight, neither one is the core of the sentence—they have to coordinate. When a sentence does have just one independent clause at its core, though, the other grammatical units—**nonessential elements**, or information that isn't integral to core meaning of the sentence—can be added to the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence with commas.

Let's look at an independent clause to begin with, and then start adding to it:

Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Independent clause)

## Adding to the beginning

Information put at the beginning of a sentence that is not part of the core independent clause is what's called an **introductory element** (one type of nonessential element), and it should be set apart by a comma. This can be as short as a single word or as long as an entire dependent clause (see INDEPENDENT AND DEPENDENT CLAUSES Handout):

**Incidentally,** Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Word)

**Contrary to popular belief,** Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Phrase)

**Although Mt Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth,** Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Dependent clause)

## Adding to the middle

This same thing can happen in the middle of a sentence, where a **nonessential element** is sandwiched between commas to set it apart from the sentence's core.

Olympus Mons on Mars is**, astonishingly,** the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Word)

Olympus Mons on Mars**, a 22km tall shield volcano,** is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Phrase)

Olympus Mons on Mars**, even though it is only two and a half times the height of Mt Everest on Earth,** is the tallest mountain in the solar system. (Dependent clause)

## Adding to the end

Adding information to the end of the sentence functions exactly the same way:

Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system**, Arin**. (Word)

Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system**, peaking at 22 km above sea level**. (Phrase)

Olympus Mons on Mars is the tallest mountain in the solar system**, if you really want to know**. (Dependent clause)