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Commas

The festival message desk





Grammar at a glance

When you want to...	Form to use	Worked example
List three items	A, B and C	Bring rice, beans and peas.
Speak to someone	name, message	Ravi, bring the rice.
Introduce a main clause	opening clause, main clause	When the rice is ready, call us.
Repair a comma splice	clause, and clause / two sentences	The rice is ready, and the guests are here.

SELECT A ROW TO OPEN ITS LESSON

COMMAS

Separate items, not every word

Lily needs red paint, small brushes and paper plates. Sam reads each group as one supply. Place commas at the boundaries so nobody mistakes part of an item for a separate request.

Put commas between items in a list of three or more. The final comma before and is a style choice when the meaning is clear.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Without boundaries	Pack red paint small brushes and paper plates.	The reader has to work out where each supply ends.
Group the supplies	Pack red paint, small brushes and paper plates.	There are three items. Each item can contain more than one word.
Another example	Bring rice, beans and peas.	List three items. Pattern: A, B and C.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Item 1 + comma	Item 2	And + item 3
red paint,	small brushes	and paper plates

Is a comma just a place to breathe?

No. Readers pause differently. Identify grammatical groups and meaning rather than inserting a comma wherever you happen to pause.

YOUR TURN

Add list punctuation: “Bring pens books and folders.”

> Answer • Bring pens, books and folders.
> A comma after books is optional in this list.

COMMAS

Separate a person being addressed

Lily is speaking to Sam. His name can appear at the start, middle or end of her request. Separate the name she calls from the instruction; a name doing the action is different.

Set off the person you are speaking to with a comma. “Wait, Sam” speaks to Sam.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Talk to Sam	Sam, bring the signs.	Sam is the person being addressed. The instruction is bring the signs.
Talk about Sam	Sam brings the signs.	Sam is the subject doing the action. Do not separate it from brings.
Another example	Ravi, bring the rice.	Speak to someone. Pattern: name, message.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Person addressed	Instruction	Subject in a report	What he does
Sam,	bring the signs.	Sam	brings the signs.

Should every name have commas around it?

No. Use direct-address commas when the name identifies the audience. A subject or object is part of the sentence structure and is not separated merely because it is a name.

YOUR TURN

Speak to Sam: “Wait here Sam.”

> **Answer • Wait here, Sam.**
> The name at the end is direct address.

COMMAS

Mark the end of an opening clause

Rain delays the opening. Lily can begin with the reason or put it after the main news. Readers need to see where the opening reason ends and the complete main thought begins.

A comma after an opening dependent clause helps readers see where the main clause begins.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Reason first	Because it rained, we opened late.	The opening reason is followed by a comma and the main clause.
News first	We opened late because it rained.	The reason follows the main clause; this straightforward because sentence needs no comma.
Another example	When the rice is ready, call us.	Introduce a main clause. Pattern: opening clause, main clause.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Opening reason	Boundary	Main clause
Because it rained	,	we opened late.

Does every sentence starting with because need fixing?

No. An opening because clause can begin a complete sentence when a main clause follows. Because it rained alone is incomplete in this notice, but Because it rained, we opened late is complete.

YOUR TURN

Add the opening-clause comma: “Because the bus was late we walked.”

> Answer • Because the bus was late, we walked.
> The whole opening reason ends at late.

COMMAS

Join complete thoughts without comma splices

The gate opens and visitors arrive. Both facts deserve complete clauses. Lily must choose a joining structure, rather than expecting a comma alone to hold two sentences together.

Join two independent clauses with a full stop, or with a comma and a suitable conjunction. A comma alone creates a comma splice.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Comma alone	The gate opened, visitors arrived.	These two complete clauses are joined only by a comma: a comma splice in standard school writing.
Comma and connector	The gate opened, and visitors arrived.	A comma and and connect the complete clauses clearly.
Two sentences	The gate opened. Visitors arrived.	A full stop separates the two complete thoughts.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Complete clause 1	Join	Complete clause 2
The gate opened	, and	visitors arrived.

Must I put a comma before every and?

No. First identify what and connects. Two items or two actions sharing a subject are different from two complete clauses. A comma with a coordinating conjunction is a useful default for the complete-clause examples here.

YOUR TURN

Which avoids a comma splice?

The music began, everyone listened. / The music began, and everyone listened.

> Answer • The music began, and everyone listened.
> And supplies the connector between complete clauses.

ONE LAST CHALLENGE

Who should bring the snacks?

Speak directly to Tara and ask her to bring three things: apples, pears and plums.



A POSSIBLE ANSWER

Tara, please bring apples, pears and plums.

The first comma separates the listener's name. The next separates list items.

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