



# Comma Dos

**Rule #1:** Use a comma after introductory phrases that tell *where, when, why, or how*. The comma helps readers to identify the subject of the sentence.

EXAMPLE (where):

On the first floor of the Student Success Center, you can find many free tutoring services.

EXAMPLE (when):

After the snow melts and the daffodils bloom, JMU photographers reach for their cameras.

EXAMPLE (why):

In order set up your appointment with a JMU Writing Center tutor, you must first visit [jmu.edu/uwc](http://jmu.edu/uwc) to create an account.

EXAMPLE (how):

Halfway asleep and still wearing his pajamas, Frank trudged toward his 8:00 class.

You may opt to omit a comma after a very short introductory phrase. Still, you'll never be wrong in using a comma after an introductory phrase,

First we will stop at Chic-Fil-A for lunch.

**Rule #2:** Use a comma before a conjunction to join two independent clauses that form a compound sentence. After the comma, use one of the FANBOYS conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*.

→ What is a compound sentence?

A **compound sentence** is a sentence that has two independent clauses.

Ann attended every JMU football game this fall, so she bought a season pass for next year.

JMU built a new parking garage this school year, and they are hoping students will be able to use it in the fall.

🚫 **CAUTION**🚫 Don't confuse a compound sentence that has two independent clauses with a **simple sentence that has two verbs**. A simple sentence with two verbs (e.g., "She kicked and screamed") does not need to be separated with a comma.

**Rule #3:** Offset appositives, adjective phrases and clauses, and interrupter words (like *however, nevertheless, yes, no, of course, etc.*) from the rest of the sentence with commas.

EXAMPLES of interrupter words:

Jason forgot, unfortunately, that his Writing Center appointment started 30 minutes ago.

Unfortunately, Jason forgot his Writing Center appointment started 30 minutes ago.

EXAMPLES of appositives:

Joe, a psychology major, is also a tutor in the Writing Center.

I had dinner the other night with Susan, a junior at JMU.

EXAMPLES of adjective phrases:

Trying to catch the bus before it left, Sarah ran through the quad.

Exhausted and stressed, Kyle didn't want to wait in line at Starbucks for 30 minutes.

EXAMPLE of adjective clause:

Barry, who works at Starbucks, also works at Dunkin Donuts on the weekend.

**Rule #4:** Use commas between adjectives that are placed next to each other (these are called coordinate adjectives).

How do you determine whether adjectives are coordinate or not?

1. See whether “and” can be placed between them.
2. See whether the adjectives’ order can be reversed.

EXAMPLES:

The happy, lively JMU students cheered at the football game.

You can find many tired, stressed students in the SSC during exam week

By the time spring rolls around, the quad is filled with smiling, cheerful students.

**🚫 CAUTION🚫** Words that look like/function as adjectives don’t always pair together as coordinate adjectives (e.g., “I told all my friends about my productive tutoring session”). When you’re in doubt, use the two steps above. If your sentence doesn’t make sense or doesn’t have the same meaning, the adjectives are likely not coordinate, and you don’t need a comma.

**Rule #5:** Use commas to separate items in a list or series or three or more items, where the final item is separated by a conjunction (*and*, *or*, *nor*).

EXAMPLES:

This weekend JMU has soccer, volleyball, **and** football games.

At JMU’s new REC center, you can swim, lift weights, **or** use the elliptical.

The University Writing Center, Digital Communications Center, **and** Math and Science Learning Center all offer free tutoring services for JMU students.

## **The Oxford comma:** What is it, why do people care about it, and should I use it?

The Oxford comma (also known as the serial comma) is the comma before the conjunction in a list, and it helps readers to know how to understand your meaning. Check out this sentence:

I love my two majors, Facebooking and taking selfies.

Without an Oxford comma, even the most forgiving reader could easily think that you are majoring in Facebooking and taking selfies. But there's a deeper concern about the Oxford comma, in part because it's one of the first punctuation "rules" we learn: readers who were taught to expect it tend to get out a mental red pen when it's not there; conversely, readers taught to omit the Oxford comma might feel that you are over-punctuating when you use it.

Journalists who use **Associated Press (AP)** style tend to omit the Oxford comma because it saves space in a printed newspaper column (remember those?). In academic writing—particularly American academic writing—the most commonly-used style guides/citation styles explicitly require the Oxford comma.

The most recent **APA** style manual and the most recent **Chicago/Turabian** manuals explicitly require the Oxford comma. The most recent edition of the **MLA Handbook** (2016) does not explicitly address the subject, but does employ the Oxford comma throughout the text.

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→ Check out the UWC's "Comma Don'ts" page in our [Online Writing Tips and Resources library](#) for more advice on how to correctly use commas.