

Punctuation

where to use, and where not to use,
commas

Introductory phrases

Independent clause

There is some disagreement about the use of commas.

Introductory phrase

+ independent clause

Even among proficient writers, there is some disagreement about the use of commas.

Introductory phrases

You have no issues in punctuating the beginning of a sentence when you begin directly with its subject, as I did this one.

However, when a sentence includes several introductory words, phrases, and clauses, especially when they have their own internal punctuation, **choosing where to add commas may prove challenging.**



EXPLANATION

If you need to use an expression that comes before the independent clause (**in red above**), use a comma.

Introductory phrases

Note: these include transition words and phrases

EXAMPLES

Therefore, I plan to quit smoking.

Nervously, I threw away my cigarettes.

As a result, I feel terrible right now.

After 16 years of smoking, it is not easy to quit.

Having smoked for 16 years, I find it difficult to quit.

When a phrase **interrupts** the main, independent clause, put a comma after it.

EXAMPLES

The new administrator, **despite having done nothing wrong**, lost her job within six months.

I plan, **therefore**, to join a support group for ex-smokers.

You should try, **whenever possible**, to check your results against the predicted outcomes.

Adverbial clauses

An adverbial clause is a **dependent** clause that tells the reader *when, where, why, how, how long, how far, how often, and for what purpose*.

Adverbial clauses are introduced by words such as *because, when, whenever, while, as soon as, after, since, as, before, until, where, wherever, as, as if, although, even though, though, if, unless*.

Adverbial clauses

When an adverbial clause comes **first** in a sentence, put a comma after it. When an adverbial clause **follows** an independent clause, do not separate the clauses with a comma.

Because she was late every day, she lost her job.

Adverbial clause

Independent clause

She lost her job because she was late every day.

Independent clause

Adverbial clause

EXPLANATION

Adverbial clauses function as adverbials, so they should appear after the independent sentence (to follow the traditional word order: **subject – verb – object – adverbials**). If they appear at the beginning, use a comma because they break the traditional word order (as do introductory phrases).

Adverbial clauses

EXAMPLES

Although I had studied all night, I failed the test.

If you write a little every day, you will complete the task easily.

Whenever I had to speak in front of people, I was paralysed by fear.

After they had discussed the issue at length, they reached an agreement that was acceptable to all parties.

The men hunted game **while the women gathered plants.**

Nominal clauses

A **nominal clause** is a dependent clause that functions as a noun. It is often part of an independent clause, where it can be a subject or an object.

subject



What the newspaper reported was incorrect.

object



People once believed **that the world was flat**.

EXPLANATION:
Never use a comma to separate a nominal clause from the independent clause.

Nominal clauses

EXAMPLES

I am sure **that the address is correct.**

It is certain **that Earth is getting warmer.**

The class was surprised **that the instructor canceled the final exam.**

Do you know **who the interpreter for the Russian leader was?**

The students want to know **if the test is easy.**

Police do not know **who committed the robbery.**

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