

Taming those pesky commas

Punctuation is complicated. The section on commas in *The Chicago Manual of Style* is 14 pages; that kind of thing keeps copyeditors in business. Here, I've given the bare minimum you need to know about commas, as briefly as possible.

When to use a comma

- To separate items in a list of more than two: “Choose from wool, silk, or cotton.”
- Before a conjunction joining clauses that stand alone as sentences: “She knitted a sweater, and he wore it.”
- To set off introductory information: “When I was a girl, my grandmother taught me to knit.”
- To set off a parenthetical insertion: “Kate Gilbert, who lives in Montreal, is a popular knitwear designer.”
- To separate adjectives that each qualify a noun: “This is a smooth, lofty yarn” (smooth and lofty both apply to yarn). But watch for cumulative adjectives: these don't require a comma. “He wore a brown wool sweater” (brown applies to wool which applies to sweater). To decide whether to use a comma in these instances, substitute “and” where the comma would go. “Smooth and lofty yarn.” Yes. Use comma. “Brown and wool sweater.” No. Omit comma.
- To dangle a participle or other modifying phrase: “Knitting through the night, she finished the sweater in time for Christmas.” But make sure the verb (*knitting*) or other phrase properly applies to the subject (*she*).
- To separate a quote from its attribution: He said, “I love this sweater.”
- To mark the end of a salutation in a letter: “Dear Mr. Mondragon,”
- To separate the parts of an address: 1320 S. Minnesota Ave., Sioux Falls, SD 57105



When not to use a comma

- Before a verb: “Whether the fiber is manmade, is irrelevant.” (Delete the comma.) Prior to the 20th century, writers often included this comma, but there is no grammatical reason to do so.
- To needlessly set off an adverb: “We, therefore, bought acrylic yarn.” (Delete the commas.)
- Before a conjunction joining clauses, when the clause following the conjunction does not stand as a sentence: “She knitted a sweater, and two hats.” (Delete the comma.)
- To splice together stand-alone clauses without a conjunction: She knitted a sweater, he wore it.” (Replace the comma with a semicolon or period, or add *and* after the comma.)



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I hope this cheat sheet helped you. Please send me your grammar, usage, and style questions. I'll answer your question directly and on my blog.

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