

THE SIX COMMA RULES

INTRODUCTION

You have been writing and having tutoring sessions, and one of the things we talk to you about the most is commas. So how many comma rules are you beginning to think there are? (Improvise—feels like a gazillion.) (Don't put anyone on the spot.)

COMMA MYTH: Many people believe we put commas wherever we pause and take a breath.

Figuring out commas can sometimes seem daunting, but we really only have to worry about 6 basic rules. Two of them we have gone over a lot already, and they are the hardest ones because they have to do with whether or not you have a complete sentence, or IC, and how to help the reader see that (Rules #1 and #3).

COMMA RULES

List the rules when discussing with the students. Reminder: one tutor writes on the board while the other talks.

EXAMPLES: all the example sentences below should be on the board before workshop

RULE 1: IC, FANBOYS IC

Before FANBOYS connecting two independent clauses.

EXAMPLE: Sam helped Frodo, and the mission was successful.

COUNTER-EXAMPLE: I went to the store but forgot my wallet. (This sentence helps students see that a comma is not always correct before a conjunction.)

RULE 2: LISTS

Separate three or more items in a series.

EXAMPLES:

1. Sam helped Frodo climb the mountain, fight off Gollum, and destroy the ring.
2. I dedicate this book to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.
(Place one comma after *parents* and ask them if that does the trick. What does the sentence mean now? Hint: need one more comma.) (from Strunk and White.)

Debate between using the Oxford comma: mention in academic writing they generally want the comma before the “and”—one less comma than items in list.

RULE 3: INTRODUCTORY CLAUSES AND PHRASES AND TAG-PHRASES

After an introductory expression or before a comment or question tagged onto the end.

EXAMPLES:

1. Because Sam helped Frodo (DC), the mission was successful (IC).
Think back on DC, IC—this is a form of an introductory expression.
In addition to showing DC, IC, remind students about IC DC (without a comma between).
The mission was successful because Sam helped Frodo. (Emphasize that there is no comma needed before “because.”)
2. On May fourth, we will prepare for Cinco de Mayo.
3. Then they said they needed “down” time, whatever that means. (tag phrase example)

RULE 4: NAMES

Around the name of a person spoken to.

EXAMPLES:

1. I'm sorry, Frodo, but there is more to do.
2. Let's eat, Grandpa.
(Leave out the comma to show why it's needed. What does it mean this way? Is Grandpa the main course, or is he invited?)

RULE 5: INTERRUPTIONS

Around expressions that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

EXAMPLE: You know, of course, that your friends miss you.

RULE 6: NON-ESSENTIAL INFO

Around information not needed in the sentence, i.e., "scoopable" information.

EXAMPLES:

1. Frodo, who carried the ring, was the main hero.
2. The one who carried the ring was the main hero.

PRE-TEST & POST-TEST

Workshop sentences in questions 2 and 4 on the board. Refer to laminated sentences.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Have students work individually or in groups of two, identifying where the commas go in the laminated sentence exercises. (Working individually or with one other person for this week will give our students practice using the principles they have been reviewing.) These exercises focus mainly on Comma Rules 1 and 3.

COLOR KEY

BLUE TEXT refers to something that should be written on the board for the workshop.

RED TEXT refers to markings that need to be added to sentences during the workshop.

GREEN TEXT is for added emphasis or is for something important but that is hard to spot in a big block of text.