



Editing 4 You

Take Command of Your Commas

A Tutorial on the Basic Rules of Comma Usage



In a conundrum about comma usage? You're not alone.

But don't beat yourself up. After all, the comma is perhaps the most frequently used bit of punctuation, especially in fiction. And to make matters really confusing, it seems like there's an exception to almost every rule. So what's a writer to do?

Take a deep breath, have a leisurely read of this tutorial, and grow your confidence in knowing when and where to put these pesky – but enormously important – little curved critters to make life easy for your readers.

Happy writing!



Before We Get Started

- Sidebars will provide definitions, tips and tricks, or other useful supplementary information
- Some definitions may be simplified
 - Purists may cringe, but the point here is to be “easy to understand and to apply”
- Examples are meant to be illustrative – to compare poor use with best practice
 - They’re generally more simplistic than what we might actually write in a narrative. The point is to make a point about commas – not to illustrate elegant prose.
 - If you’ve seen counter-examples, it may be an unusual stylistic choice on the part of an individual writer – or it may just be an example of a lapse of copyediting.
- Don’t worry if it doesn’t all come naturally right away
 - You’ll get the hang of it with practice



The Comma's Job Description



Ensure clarity



Indicate rhythm and phrasing



Provide a signpost or signal for what comes next

Watch for these little icons as clues for which role is served by the rules and examples





A Panda Walks Into a Bar

Adapted from *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, by Lynne Truss, © 2003, Lynne Truss



Write – and punctuate – what you want the reader to understand

A panda walks into a bar wearing a pistol belt. He eats shoots and leaves.

The panda apparently orders a bamboo salad, consisting of shoots and leaves, and chows down. His attire, while curious, has no role in the scene.

A panda walks into a bar wearing a pistol belt. He eats shoots, and leaves.

The panda apparently orders a bamboo salad and, being a finicky eater, picks out only the shoots. When he finishes, he leaves. Once again, his attire has no role in the scene.

A panda walks into a bar wearing a pistol belt. He eats, shoots and leaves.

This gets ambiguous. Should the reader think, “The panda eats -- what he eats is shoots and leaves”? Or should we think, “The panda eats, fires his weapon, and then leaves the bar”? There’s no way to be sure.

A panda walks into a bar wearing a pistol belt. He eats, shoots, and leaves.

Now things are exciting. The panda has his meal, then acts on an urge to fire his gun at something, and finally, leaves the premises. Precisely what he eats plays no role in the scene. Nor does what he shoots at.

TIP: The presence or absence of commas makes a really big difference in meaning.

TRICK: Step out of your story for a moment, put on your “literalist” hat, and read exactly what you’ve written. If that’s not what you meant, then maybe a well-placed comma can solve your problem.

And yes, this should really be written “A panda wearing a pistol belt walks into a bar.” But “walks into a bar” jokes aren’t known for being paragons of good grammar 😊

This illustration is intentionally complicated by the fact that “shoots” and “leaves” can both be either nouns or verbs. But our prose is never immune from complications that can be disambiguated by proper punctuation – the point of Ms. Truss’s book.



Make Friends with the Oxford Comma (aka serial comma)



Understanding Series

Examples of series

Lists of things

Trees, vines, flowers, and rocks filled the garden.

Multiple modifiers

Her hair was long, blonde, and curly.

Compound predicates

Chris sang, danced, and threw confetti in the air.

Combinations of series

Her hair was long, blonde, and curly, glistened in the sun, and tempted any man to touch it.

Trees, vines, flowers, and rocks filled the garden, stoked Jane's imagination, and became props for the love scene in her new novel.

Comma-separated series can just as easily be connected by conjunctions:

Trees, vines, flowers, and rocks
Trees and vines and flowers and rocks

The conjunction could also be “or” or “then,” for example

Girls with blonde, brunette, or auburn hair
Girls with blonde or brunette or auburn hair

He stood, took his cane in hand, then walked slowly to the door.

He stood, then took his cane in hand, then walked slowly to the door.

The Oxford comma is that last comma before the conjunction and signals the end of the series.

DEFINITION: compound predicate — two or more verbs that share the same subject

TIP: Do you have 3 or more like items? (nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.) Then you have a series and should use an Oxford comma.

These examples are fairly straightforward and unlikely to confuse readers if you don't use the Oxford comma, but our prose isn't always simple and unambiguous.



Why the Oxford Comma Matters



In the real world, the absence of an Oxford comma cost a Maine dairy \$5 million

Text of the statute at the time of the lawsuit:

The canning, processing, preserving, freezing, drying, marketing, storing, packing for shipment or distribution of:

- (1) Agricultural produce;
- (2) Meat and fish products; and
- (3) Perishable foods.

The court's ruling:

Without a comma before the “or,” it was impossible to determine which of the following was intended:

- packing the items listed for one of two purposes (shipment or distribution)
- packing or distributing the items listed

Based on the ambiguity, the court held the dairy responsible for paying 4 years of overtime back-pay to the drivers who distributed the listed items.

In fiction, a missing Oxford comma isn't likely to cost the writer real dollars. But could it cost you a good review?

Consider the following sentence:

When the waitress came to the table, he couldn't make up his mind, so he ordered ham and eggs, biscuits with gravy and jam and ice cream.

Did he expect the biscuits to come with gravy, jam, and ice cream all piled on top? Probably not. So help the reader – drop that Oxford comma in the right spot. In this case, there are actually *two* plausible possibilities – and readers can't be certain which you mean unless you properly place that comma.

- . . . he ordered ham and eggs, biscuits with gravy and jam, and ice cream.
- . . . he ordered ham and eggs, biscuits with gravy, and jam and ice cream.

Will what's on the biscuits lead to a bad review? Probably not. But if readers draw the wrong conclusion from ambiguous dialogue, plot points, characterizations, or descriptions, one of those coveted 5 stars might be at risk.



Point – Counterpoint – Recapitulation



Oxford Comma Enthusiasts

Using the Oxford comma avoids the risk of ambiguity



Two Camps

Oxford Comma Naysayers

Oxford commas can introduce ambiguity



An often-cited example:

He went to town with his father, Superman and Wonder Woman.

He went to town with his father, Superman, and Wonder Woman.

Is Superman his father or just another person who went to town?

**Your Decision
But**

- Oxford commas eliminate ambiguity more often than they create it
- If ambiguity is created, it's very easy to see and generally easy to fix
- It's a standard of the Chicago Manual of Style and many publishers' house styles
- One easy keystroke ensures clarity and avoids time spent on future revisions (or paying your copy editor to do them)

**Become an Oxford
Comma Enthusiast**



Some Rules

And when you can break them



Compound Sentences



The Rule

A comma is required after the word that immediately precedes the conjunction.

The holiday season was not far away, and Sheila wanted her house to look festive.

The holiday season wasn't far away, so Sheila went online to look for new decorations.

"This website is great for Christmas items, but check out this other site if you're featuring Kwanzaa," Nancy told her.

The Exceptions

The comma may be omitted if the two clauses are short and tightly related.

Ellen got the mail while Fred took out the trash.

Henry liked oranges but Jennifer hated them.

George sneezed and Jane shouted "Gesundheit!"

The holiday season wasn't far away and Sheila wanted her house to look festive, so she went online to find some websites that might have a wide selection of modern decorations.

In this example, the first two clauses are short and directly related so it's permissible to omit the comma after "away." It's also permissible to *use* a comma there. To decide on the punctuation, consider where you want the reader to pause – twice (after "away" and after "festive") or just once? This becomes a question of flow, rhythm, and phrasing.

DEFINITION: compound sentence — two independent clauses joined by a conjunction

DEFINITION: independent clause — a collection of words that includes a subject and verb and that could stand alone as a complete sentence

CONJUNCTIONS:

| | | |
|------|-----------|-------------------|
| and | yet | while |
| or | though | nevertheless |
| but | although | thus |
| then | however | other conjunctive |
| so | therefore | adverbs(*) |

(*) See "Tricky Conjunctions"

TIP: Don't fall into the "Conjunction Trap" (see next page).



The Conjunction Trap

Use of a comma before the conjunction in compound sentences does **not** mean we have to find a way to put a comma with every conjunction.

Correct:

Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, but there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

If you prefer to have two sentences, you'd write

Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. But there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

Not

Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. But, there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found. 

The Rule

If a sentence begins with a conjunction, it is punctuated exactly as if it were part of a compound sentence.

TIP: An easy way to remember this is to think of the period at the end of the first sentence as taking the place of the comma in the compound sentence.

TIP: If an explanatory phrase follows the conjunction, that phrase may be set off by a comma. (See the examples under “Putting Things Together.”) This is not an exception – it follows the rule precisely, as you will see in those examples.



The Tricky Conjunctions

However

Tricky because it can be used as a sentence adverb or as a conjunctive adverb
When used as a conjunction, usually replaces “but” in cases where more emphasis is desired
Always set off with commas when used as a sentence adverb
Most style guides recommend the same punctuation when used as a conjunction
Other conjunctive adverbs are treated the same way

So

Tricky because your intent matters – a lot!
Do you want to convey direct cause and effect?
Damon had spent all day packing his parachute. So he knew it would open flawlessly.
Or do you want to suggest a longer pause, as if some thought or consideration precedes the second clause? In this case, “so” is functioning as an introductory phrase.
Damon hadn’t done a dual jump before. So, did he really want to try the first one with Beth?
Both are correct – it’s the rhythm/phrasing that matters

DEFINITION: sentence adverb
— an adverb that modifies an entire sentence

Examples of sentence adverb usage:

Unfortunately, Lucas didn’t like chick flicks.

Heavy clouds, however, portended more days of rain.

DEFINITION: conjunctive adverb
— an adverb used as a conjunction

Examples of conjunctive adverb usage:

Angela loved chick flicks; however, Lucas despised them.

Fighting will get you expelled from school, Zeke; besides, Ned would beat you up.



Comma Splices – Be careful . . . Be very careful

The Rule

Don't glue two independent clauses together with just a comma.

Run-on sentence: Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

Comma splice: Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

Correct: Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, but there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

Correct: Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. But there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found.

Correct: Jane went into the bathroom to brush her teeth; there was no toothpaste anywhere to be found. (A semicolon can stand in for the comma+conjunction. This may be useful in complex sentences, but don't overuse semicolons.)

The Exceptions

Be careful, be purposeful. (See how I made a mindful decision to use a splice?)

The classic example of comma splices in fiction is the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, . . ."

When the clauses are short, repetitive, and related (the Dickens example), a comma splice may be an acceptable choice. But even Dickens uses conventional punctuation in the rest of the novel. Short, choppy spliced clauses can also be used for high-action, rapid pacing, but be **very** careful – the same thing can be achieved using periods or even using sentence fragments, and fragments may often be the better choice.

For dialogue or internal monologue – especially if it's a consistent pattern of a specific character's speech – there may be justification for using a comma splice. But speech is not a license to use comma splices willy-nilly.

DEFINITION: comma splice — two independent clauses joined only by a comma

DEFINITION: independent clause — a collection of words that includes a subject and verb and that could stand alone as a complete sentence

TIP: There's **always** an alternate punctuation to avoid comma splices.

TIP: Pervasive comma splices in a book indicate a lapse in copyediting/proofreading and reflect poorly on the writer – and can even cost you a star from some reviewers.

TRICK: Adopt the mindset that comma splices are forbidden. Then you can make a conscious stylistic choice if you use one and be able to defend that choice to your editor.



The Predicate Splice – Just as Risky



This is my own terminology, coined to describe the situation in which a writer omits the conjunction in a compound predicate and just splices the predicates together.

Predicate Splice: The farmer walked up and down the rows of corn in his field, marveled at how much the stalks had grown since the last rain.

Correct: The farmer walked up and down the rows of corn in his field and marveled at how much the stalks had grown since the last rain.

Sometimes restructuring the sentence is a great solution that allows you to direct the reader’s attention to what’s most important in the sentence:

The farmer walked up and down the rows of corn in his field, marveling at how much the stalks had grown since the last rain. *This construct focuses attention on the farmer walking.*

Walking up and down the rows of corn in his field, the farmer marveled at how much the stalks had grown since the last rain. *This construct focuses attention on the growth of the stalks and the fact that it had recently rained.*

While some might argue that using predicate splices is a stylistic decision that reflects the author’s voice, it’s usually a poor choice because it almost always results in awkward flow for the reader and can also fail to convey an inflection that might be important in the context of the narrative. That said, like the comma splice, there are rare situations in which a predicate splice can be effective – if you use it, be sure you can defend it.

DEFINITION: **compound predicate** — two or more verbs that share the same subject

TIP: Just use the conjunction. “And,” “but,” and “or” lead in very different directions, so avoid having your reader supply the wrong choice.

TRICK: Read the sentence aloud, exactly as it’s written. Is there a hiccup at the comma? Perhaps you were supplying the conjunction automatically, in your head, even though you didn’t write it.

TIP: If you find frequent occurrences of this construct in your manuscript, it may be an indicator that more variety in sentence structure would improve the work overall.



Introductory Phrases



The Rule

A comma is required at the end of an introductory phrase.

If the rain didn't stop soon, there was a good chance the dam would break.

Heedless of the danger ahead, the riders urged their horses to a canter.

Despite the sound of bombs falling all around, Greta felt safe in the basement of her house.

Whether he knew it or not, Jared was a favorite of all the women in the office.

Even in the face of the absolute destruction wrought by the hurricane and the storm surge that followed, the people of San Felipe knew they would stay here and rebuild.

Doomed to spend the holidays alone, Sheila saw no point in putting up any decorations.

While trying to recover from the blow, I could only breathe in short gasps.

In the end, nothing mattered but finding LaToya alive.

Downstairs, the party went on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The Exceptions

I struggle to think of any.

DEFINITION: introductory phrase — a phrase (perhaps a single word) at the beginning of a sentence that precedes the subject and sets context for the rest of the sentence

TIP: This is an easy rule to follow with simple introductory phrases. Few writers get tripped up. Things can get tricky when the intros get complex, but we'll deal with that later in this tutorial.

TIP: Be sure your introductory phrase isn't a dangler – that it has the proper relationship to the subject of the sentence. For help with this, download my tutorial entitled "Don't Leave Your Readers Dangling."



Explanatory or Parenthetical Phrases

The Rule

Explanatory or parenthetical phrases are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas before and after.

Every woman's head turned as Jared, the new guy in the office, crossed the room to his desk.

Jennifer relished the idea that her blonde hair, though not natural, was the envy of all the other models.

Maria dreamed of her childhood in the islands whenever the wind blew, whether in gusts or just a gentle breeze.

Math class, always Tom's nemesis, was even harder today than usual.

Allison sobbed, her heart broken, as she watched Ricky walk off with Tanya.

That horse, which had won blue ribbons at the last five rodeos, was the one Georgia was determined to own.

The Exceptions

When you want the reader to take a longer pause or when the phrase is somewhat tangential to the main train of thought, consider using en dashes to set off the phrase.

Whenever the wind blew – whether in gusts or just a gentle breeze – Maria felt transported back to her childhood home on the island and longed for the friends she'd left behind.

Going to confession – that weekly ritual Derek hated because he just didn't get the point of it all – was completely unavoidable now that he had such a devout stepmother.

DEFINITION: explanatory or parenthetical phrase — a phrase in the middle or at the end of a sentence that provides supplemental information

TIP: At the end of a sentence, the period (or question mark or exclamation mark) takes the place of the comma at the end of the phrase.

TIP: Restrictive clauses beginning with "which" are almost always preceded by a comma.



Explanatory Phrases – A Special Case

Explaining Relationships

The Rule

The explanatory phrase is set off by commas, just like any other explanatory phrase.

Annemarie, my sister, is also my closest friend.

My history teacher, Mr. Thompson, is also the basketball coach.

The Exceptions

When the relationship explanation is restrictive, the comma may be omitted.

(Readers know from prior text that Lakshmi has 5 brothers.) Her brother Vikram always seemed to be in trouble for one thing or another.

My uncle Deion played baseball in the minor leagues.

TIP: Be careful about omitting the comma – be certain that the name is limiting or restrictive. When in doubt, examine the context.

TIP: In some cases, using the comma even when the relationship is restrictive will not change the meaning or tone.



Direct Address



The Rule

Direct address is always set off by commas. At the beginning of a sentence, a comma must follow the direct address. In the middle of a sentence, commas must precede and follow the direct address. At the end of a sentence, a comma must precede the direct address.

“Hello, Margaret,” said John.

“What’s wrong, Mother?”

“You know, Fred, the kids will be home from college in a week.”

“I told you, sweetheart, we couldn’t afford a vacation this year.”

“Eric, go pick up the mess in your room right now!”

“Hi, punkin,” Max greeted his daughter at the door. “Have fun at school today?”

“No, sir, I didn’t finish the assignment. Can I turn it in late?”

The Exceptions

None. (Really – none.)

DEFINITION: direct address — addressing a character by name, a nickname, an honorific, or an endearment that stands in for the name



Odds and Ends



Oh, ah, well, etc.

Yes and no (and their colloquial equivalents yeah, yep, nah, nope, uh-huh, uh-uh)

The Rule

When they introduce a thought, they should be followed by a comma (i.e., treat as an introductory phrase).

Oh, that was a really bad idea.

Well, it's not rocket science.

Yep, our flight was cancelled.

No, thank you.

When they are part of a common expression or used in other contexts, no comma is used.

Oh dear, whatever made you think that?

Oh my God, it's a catastrophe!

No way that could be right. *In this case, "no" is an adjective.*

She said yes when he asked her to dinner.

Interrogatories at the end of an otherwise declarative sentence

The Rule

A comma is used before the interrogatory.

Now, that didn't work out quite like you expected, did it?

You'd have thought someone would have figured that out earlier, wouldn't you?

With all her money, it's such a shame Monica can't be more generous now and then, isn't it?



Putting It All Together



Don't Get Tripped Up

The rules are pretty easy to follow in relatively simple sentences like the examples. But good writing doesn't rely entirely on simple sentences.

Complex sentences give us the opportunity to convey more to the reader. In a complex sentence, clarity, rhythm and phrasing, and signposts are even more important.

That said, complex sentences are nothing more than combinations of the constructs in simple sentences.

TIP: Don't let complex sentences intimidate you.

TIP: Follow the rules (or exceptions) for simple sentences, and you'll be right most of the time.

TIP: Don't feel the need to throw in extra commas just because the sentence is long. Those extra commas might actually change the meaning of your words.

TRICK: Take the sentence apart into smaller units – or even write it as a series of simple sentences – and figure out where the commas go in the smaller units.

TRICK: If the commas are in the right places and there are still so many that you fear readers will stumble, consider alternate punctuation:

- En dash for a parenthetical phrase
- Ellipsis if it's helpful for the reader to take a slightly longer pause
- Semicolon instead of a comma to separate the two independent clauses, especially if each clause is complex.

TRICK: Don't forget that restructuring the sentence may be the best way to simultaneously improve the flow and minimize the punctuation.



A Look at Some Complex Sentences

Key to the analysis markings:

Compound Sentence

Introductory Phrase

Explanatory or
Parenthetical Phrase

Direct Address

Oxford Comma

Odds and Ends

Never one to forget a birthday, Sheila was a regular at the card shop, carefully choosing each card with a specific recipient in mind.

Whenever Maria thought of her childhood home, something she did more often when the wind blew, whether it was gales or just a gentle breeze, she told herself that, one of these days, she'd go back, visit her friends, put flowers on her mother's grave, and maybe even bring her sister back to live with her.

Compound predicate

With alternate punctuation

Whenever Maria thought of her childhood home – something she did more often when the wind blew, whether it was gales or just a gentle breeze – she told herself that, one of these days, she'd go back, visit her friends, put flowers on her mother's grave, and maybe even bring her sister back to live with her.

Compound predicate



A Look at Some Complex Sentences

Key to the analysis markings:

Compound Sentence

.....
Introductory Phrase

Explanatory or

Parenthetical Phrase

Direct Address

Oxford Comma

Odds and Ends

“Jake, come here,” Linda called to her brother, who was trotting off the field after football practice.

If they could reach the oasis in the next two days, Soraya knew they would survive the desert crossing, but she dared not voice any doubts to the other travelers, all of whom were depending on her to be confident, experienced, and reliable.

Multiple modifiers

Special case -- relationship

As they walked through the park, Maria told her best friend, Manuela, “Whenever the wind blows, I get so homesick for the islands, and all I can think about is my mother and my sister working so hard in the cane fields; however, I doubt if they’d leave, even if I could afford to bring them here.”



A Look at Some Complex Sentences

Key to the analysis markings:

Compound Sentence

.....
Introductory Phrase

Explanatory or
Parenthetical Phrase

Direct Address

Oxford Comma

Odds and Ends

“Oh, my God, Nathan! What made you think you could *steal* my phone, *sext* all your friends, pretending to be me, and then *lie* about it when I found out what you’d done? You’ve completely lost your mind, haven’t you?”
Compound predicate

“Hey, Eva,” Dana shouted above the noise of the band, which seemed to have the volume cranked up to max, “come meet my brother, Mark, who’s just back from Australia, and no, he’s not married.”
Special case -- relationship

“Oh, I’m not sure,” Chantal replied with a nervous laugh, the half-smirk on Vince’s face making her feel decidedly uncomfortable about the idea of going out with him.



A Look at Complex Compound Sentences

Key to the analysis markings:

Compound Sentence

Introductory Phrase

Explanatory or
Parenthetical Phrase

Direct Address

Oxford Comma

Odds and Ends

After two interviews filled with *half-truths, evasions, and a hefty dose of attitude*, Liz was sure she had

the right guy, but, absent any hard evidence, she couldn't charge him with the murder.

List of things

*Introductory phrase to the
second independent clause*

Written as two sentences – second sentence begins with the conjunction:

After two interviews filled with half-truths, evasions, and a hefty dose of attitude, Liz was sure she had the right guy. But, absent any hard evidence, she couldn't charge him with the murder.

Written as two sentences – no conjunction:

After two interviews filled with half-truths, evasions, and a hefty dose of attitude, Liz was sure she had the right guy. Absent any hard evidence, she couldn't charge him with the murder.



A Look at Complex Compound Sentences

Key to the analysis markings:

Compound Sentence

.....
Introductory Phrase

Explanatory or

Parenthetical Phrase

Direct Address

Oxford Comma

Odds and Ends

It wasn't fair that the drought had **killed** their crops, **forced** them to sell most of their livestock, and

Compound predicate

reduced them to bathing only once a week, so when Elizondo showed up with his buddies, who were so

Introductory phrase to the second independent clause

obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita was primed for rage and lashed out

with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay.

Written as two sentences – second sentence begins with the conjunction:

It wasn't fair that the drought had killed their crops, forced them to sell most of their livestock, and reduced them to bathing only once a week. So when Elizondo showed up with his buddies, who were so obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita was primed for rage and lashed out with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay.

Written as two sentences – no conjunction:

It wasn't fair that the drought had killed their crops, forced them to sell most of their livestock, and reduced them to bathing only once a week. When Elizondo showed up with his buddies, who were so obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita was primed for rage and lashed out with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay.



A Look at Complex Compound Sentences

Just for fun, let's see how ridiculously complex we can make the previous example

It wasn't fair that the drought had **killed** their crops, **forced** them to sell most of their livestock, and **reduced** them to bathing only once a week, **so** when her brother showed up with his buddies, who were so obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita **was** primed for rage, **lashed** out with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay, and **screamed** at the top of her lungs, "Oh my God, Elizondo, you can't really believe I'd give you what I inherited from my **mother**, my **grandmother**, and my **great-aunt!**"

Compound predicate
Introductory phrase to the second independent clause
Compound predicate
List of things (people)

Without the analysis, so it's easier to read:

It wasn't fair that the drought had killed their crops, forced them to sell most of their livestock, and reduced them to bathing only once a week, so when her brother showed up with his buddies, who were so obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita was primed for rage, lashed out with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay, and screamed at the top of her lungs, "Oh my God, Elizondo, you can't really believe I'd give you what I inherited from my mother, my grandmother, and my great-aunt!"

Pretty sure you'll agree this 99-word sentence with 14 commas is a prime candidate for restructuring



A Look at Complex Compound Sentences

Understanding the Nuances

Example 1: After two interviews filled with half-truths, evasions, and a hefty dose of attitude, Liz was sure she had the right guy, but, absent any hard evidence, she couldn't charge him with the murder.

Example 2: It wasn't fair that the drought had killed their crops, forced them to sell most of their livestock, and reduced them to bathing only once a week, so when Elizondo showed up with his buddies, who were so obviously narco-gang members, and demanded all her jewelry, Anita was primed for rage and lashed out with the nearest thing in reach, the pitchfork her dad once used to scatter hay.

In Example 1, a comma separates the conjunction (but) from the start of the introductory phrase of the second independent clause (absent). In Example 2, there is no comma after the conjunction (so). Why?

These examples illustrate the comma's role in phrasing. In a compound sentence, the presence of an introductory clause immediately after the conjunction requires you to consider nuance. There's not a hard-and-fast rule. One guideline is whether the phrase might be explanatory or parenthetical if placed elsewhere in the sentence. If so, it quite likely needs to be set off with commas at both ends. Another consideration is how direct is the causality from the first independent clause to the second. Still another is how things will sound when read aloud – don't forget your novel may be offered as an audiobook. Try it both ways, and if you're still in doubt, consult your editor.



Wrapping Things Up for Now



Things to Remember

- **Don't be intimidated by commas**
 - Remember what they're intended to accomplish (clarity, rhythm and phrasing, and signposts)
 - If you stick to the basic rules, you'll be right most of the time
 - Avoid the habit of tossing in a comma "just in case"
- **Don't forget that a misplaced, missing, or unnecessary comma can change the meaning of your sentence**
 - Read what you've written with a "literalist" mindset and decide if that's what you really meant to say
 - Reading aloud is actually quite a good way to achieve this, because you may hear things that you don't see
- **Remember that you have alternatives**
 - Sometimes restructuring a sentence is a more satisfactory solution than cluttering your prose with commas and wrestling with where to put them
- **Yes, there are more complex grammar constructs that may appear in your writing**
 - Style guides are a great resource and writing analysis software may help, though don't rely on software exclusively – it won't necessarily understand all the nuances you want to convey
 - If an advanced tutorial would be of interest, please contact me