

# The Prose Toolbox Series

COMMAS

## PUNCTUATING WITH SIX SENTENCE-BASED COMMA RULES

# Commas Summary Sheet

*The six comma rules:*

## Rule 1: INTRODUCTORY

- When words, phrases, or clauses are added to the left of a complete sentence, the introductory comma is used to separate the introductory words from the sentence.
- Example: **Though I find peace in strawberry sunsets**, I am obsessed with funnel-shaped clouds.
- Rule 1 commas are also used with introductory prepositional phrases of five-or-more words.

## Rule 2: MEDIAL

- When words, phrases, or clauses are added in the middle of a complete sentence (most likely between the subject and predicate), two medial commas are used to separate the medial words from the sentence.
- Example: Frankenstein's monster, **seeking after the man who created him**, stumbled through the northern mists.

## Rule 3: TERMINAL

- When words, phrases, or clauses are added to the right of a complete sentence, the terminal comma is used to separate the terminal words from the sentence.
- Example: The snow flurries about, **stinging our nostrils as the wind lifts it from the beach**.

## Rules 1, 2, and 3

- A sentence's subject and predicate provide us with a base sentence. Comma rules 1, 2, or 3 are used when words, phrases, or clauses are added to that base sentence.
- "Words" refers to single words; "phrases" refers to word groups like *prepositional phrases*, *participial phrases*, *appositive phrases*, and *absolute phrases*; "clauses" refers to word groups like *adverbial clauses* and *relative clauses*.
- Some word groups are moveable: they can appear in two or even in all three of the sentence slots where words might be added.

## Rule 4: ITEMS IN A SERIES

- Items in a series can take three forms:
  - **the normal way:** *item 1, item 2, and item 3*
  - **polysyndeton:** *item 1 and item 2 and item 3*
  - **asyndeton:** *item 1, item 2, item 3*
- Variety is gained through increasing the word count per item and/or increasing the number of items.

## Rule 5: TWO ADJECTIVES

- When two side-by-side adjectives are to the left of a noun—and both adjectives are modifying that same noun—the two adjectives are separated by a comma.
- Example: The **unpainted, plain** boards held the barn upright.
- The "and" rule: When "and" can be used between the two adjectives, a comma can be used; when "and" between the two adjectives does not sound correct, omit the comma.

## Rule 6: COMPOUND SENTENCES

- Here is the pattern for comma rule #6:  
Sentence <sub>(6)</sub> coordinating conjunction sentence.
- Example: The west lights fade, and stars come out in heaven.
- The mnemonic device FANBOYS can help us to memorize the seven conjunctions: **For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So**.
- "For" means "because"; "nor" has two requirements not shared with the other conjunctions; "or" implies a degree of uncertainty; "yet" implies a degree of surprise not found in the conjunction "but"; "so" is not to be confused with "so that."
- When the words to the left *or* to the right of the conjunction are less than a complete sentence, don't use a comma.
- **general:** In actual writing, multiple comma rules may appear within the same sentence.

# Commas 1: Introductory Commas

In reality, there are more than six reasons for using commas. But we will be studying only those comma rules that relate to sentence construction. We will not concern ourselves with other uses of the comma—like commas placed in dates and addresses, for example.

## Our six comma rules:

1. Introductory
2. Medial
3. Terminal
4. Items in a Series
5. Two Adjectives
6. Compound Sentences

## The Introductory Comma

We start with a sentence. The position to the left of a sentence is the *introductory* position. So words added to the left of a sentence are words added in the introductory position:

✓ ADDED WORDS <sub>(1)</sub> sentence.

This sentence pattern should be read in this way: “First some added words, then a rule #1 comma, then a sentence.”

- **start with a sentence:** I am obsessed with funnel-shaped clouds.
- **add a word(s), a phrase(s), or a clause(s):** Though I find peace in strawberry sunsets.
- **put the added words to the left; let the rule #1 comma separate the added words from the sentence:** Though I find peace in strawberry sunsets, I am obsessed with funnel-shaped clouds.

**Exercise 1:** You will be given the added, introductory words. Copy them. Then place a rule #1 comma; then add a sentence to the right of the comma. You create the sentence on your own.

1. Whistling a tune from long ago
2. Until you see the bus rounding the corner
3. Yesterday
4. In the attic behind a bag of old clothes
5. After the wolf gobbled up the grandmother and dressed in her pajamas

## Commas 2: Medial Commas

“Medial” simply means “in the middle.” So medial commas mark words that are added to the medial position within a sentence. Medial commas *always* come in pairs.

In most cases, the medial position falls between the subject and the predicate in a sentence. Often, the subject is the *who or what* of the sentence; the predicate is the action the *who or what* performs.

- **subject (the *who or what*):** Frankenstein’s monster
- **predicate (the action performed):** stumbled through the northern mists

Now when we put the subject and predicate together, the medial position is the position between them:

- Frankenstein’s monster (2) ADDED WORDS (2) stumbled through the northern mists.

In a way, the medial commas work like parentheses: they show where the added medial words begin and where they end. When the readers reach the first comma, they know they are leaving the main flow of the sentence; when they reach the second comma, they know they are returning to the main flow of the sentence.

### Example:

- Frankenstein’s monster, seeking after the man who created him, stumbled through the northern mists.

In order to make sense of this sentence, we must understand which is the *base sentence* (the subject and predicate, the parts needed in order to give us a complete sentence) and which are words added to the base sentence:

The base sentence (the subject and predicate) **cannot be removed from a sentence**; the added words **can be removed**.

Look back at the Frankenstein’s monster sentence above. Notice that the two commas break the sentence into three parts: part 1 (,) part 2 (,) part 3.

- **part 1:** Frankenstein’s monster
- **part 2:** seeking after the man who had created him
- **part 3:** stumbled through the northern mists

Now, one at a time, try removing each of the three parts while leaving the other two parts. Can you remove part 1? part 2? part 3?

The only removable part is part 2, the added words. The two medial rule #2 commas show where those added words were added to the base sentence.

**Exercise 2:** For each of the following, create an “a” answer and a “b” answer. For “a,” write the portion of the sentence that can be removed. For “b,” write the base sentence only, without the added words.

1. The Baron’s laboratory, which is built in the tower of a castle, has all the equipment necessary for creating life.
2. The brothers and sisters, leaving their histories at the door, enter the dream house.
3. The man with the ice-cream cart, working his little row of silver bells, stops opposite my window.
4. The dazed starling, which had been trapped within the room, at last found the opened window.



## Commas 3: Terminal Commas

When words, phrases, or clauses are added to the right of a sentence, a terminal comma separates those words, phrases, or clauses from the sentence to the left.

A sentence containing one terminal (#3) comma is a mirror image of a sentence containing one introductory (#1) comma. The patterns for the two mirror-image sentences look like this:

- **introductory comma:** ADDED WORDS <sub>(1)</sub> sentence.
- **terminal comma:** Sentence <sub>(3)</sub> ADDED WORDS.

Examples:

- **introductory comma:** RELIEVED THAT NO ONE HERE KNOWS ME <sub>(1)</sub> I settle into my seat.
- **terminal comma:** I settle into my seat <sub>(3)</sub> RELIEVED THAT NO ONE HERE KNOWS ME.

In order to understand the difference between these two patterns, we must see that (1) the comma divides the sentence into two parts and that (2) one of these two parts is a sentence that *can* stand alone and the other of the two parts is a word, phrase, or clause that *cannot* stand alone. If the added word, phrase, or clause is to the left, we have a rule #1 (introductory) comma; if the added word, phrase, or clause is to the right, we have a rule #3 (terminal) comma.

**Exercise 3:** In this exercise you will distinguish between introductory and terminal commas. If the comma in the sentence is introductory, write “introductory”; if the comma is terminal, write “terminal.”

1. Beautifully costumed in Renaissance brocade, the actors perform their duties upon the stage.
2. From the vast echo-chamber of the gym, the bounced basketball sounds like a leather whip.
3. The snow flurries about, stinging our nostrils as the wind lifts it from the beach.
4. He stood at the back of the boat, a youth in purple pants.
5. Driving at right angles to the wind, the clouds create a postcard-like picture.
6. The pear tree grew in the garden, bearing much less fruit this year than the year before.

## Commas 4: The Long Prepositional Phrase

When a prepositional phrase is in the introductory position, we use commas to set off longer phrases but not shorter phrases. No doubt, deciding on what counts as “long” and what doesn’t is not an exact science. Nevertheless, we will refine this rule by giving it a precise number:

- ✓ **With prepositional phrases of five-or-more words, use introductory commas.**
- ✓ **With prepositional phrases of four-or-fewer words, do not use commas.**

In order to follow this rule, we will need to know when we are, in fact, beginning a sentence with a prepositional phrase. Prepositional phrases begin with prepositions; if we were equipped with a list of prepositions, we should be able to do a pretty good job of recognizing prepositional phrases. Here is a list of prepositions:

- ❖ above, across, after, against, along, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, by, down, during, except, for, from, in, inside, into, like, near, of, off, on, out, outside, over, through, to, toward, under, until, up, upon, with, within, without

If we create a (usually) short word group that begins with a word from the list above and ends with a noun or pronoun, we’ve created a prepositional phrase:

- **above** you
- **across** the sky
- **after** the tumbling clown

These prepositional phrases are two, three, and four words long; none of these three phrases would need an introductory comma—at least not till they reached the size of five-or-more words. Two ways to increase the size of a prepositional phrase are . . .

1. *Add internal words* (**across** the endless and unforgiving sky)
2. *Stitch two or more phrases together* (**in** the contrails **across** the sky)

In summary:

- **needs no comma:** *Across the sky the geese fanned out like a capital letter.*
- **needs a comma:** *In the contrails across the sky, the morning sun reflected its rays.*

Keep in mind that a rule like “five-or-more words” is somewhat arbitrary. For example, placing a comma after a shorter phrase would be a matter of preference, not a matter of committing a grammatical error.

**Exercise 4:** Three of the following five sentences need an introductory comma. Write those three sentences only. As you do, place the introductory (#1) comma where it belongs.

Notice that in each of the five sentences, the word(s) following the introductory phrases are the subjects of the sentences.

- On a length of nylon fishline the gull strangles.
- In this garden the daisies point their leaves in all directions.
- From the kitchen table we saw the owl circling the kitchen table.
- Into the freshest deep spiraling grass the puppies dive nose first.
- Along the road to death’s open door we march like prisoners who are forced into their day’s labor.

## Commas 5: Words, Phrases, and Clauses

To this point we have been studying comma placement as it relates to sentence structure. We have been trying to achieve a vision of the sentence as a base sentence (a subject and predicate) to which words have been added. Those added words can be WORDS, PHRASES, or CLAUSES.

**“Words” refers to single words.** Some examples:

- **Today** <sup>(1)</sup> I thought I was growing wings.
- The apple of knowledge <sup>(2)</sup> **Denise** <sup>(2)</sup> should not be confused with plain bread.
- The mother’s eyes survey the fruits of her labor <sup>(3)</sup> **casually**.

**“Phrases” refers to word groups like *prepositional phrases, participial phrases, appositive phrases, and absolute phrases*.** Some examples:

- **Limited by light** <sup>(1)</sup> the farthest note trails off into oblivion.
- The Loners <sup>(2)</sup> **the men who worked the second shift** <sup>(2)</sup> toiled silently at their thankless labor.
- You hoped to make your way back home once again <sup>(3)</sup> **that ancient kiss still burning on your lips**.

**“Clauses” refers to word groups like *adverbial clauses and relative clauses*.** Some examples:

- **Though the cold may freeze them** <sup>(1)</sup> the small creatures maintain their assurance.
- My neighbor <sup>(2)</sup> **who has just rocked his car out of the treacherous ice** <sup>(2)</sup> looks at me and smiles.
- We learned the turbulence of water <sup>(3)</sup> **which had been filling the reflecting pools since morning**.

We use the term “direct address” to describe “saying in writing” the name of the person being spoken to. That name will always receive commas, as in *The apple of knowledge, **Denise**, should not be confused with plain bread.*

### Exercise 5:

1. (a) Take one of the three examples from the “words” section above and rewrite that sentence with the single word (underline it) moved to a different place within the sentence. (b) Describe the change you made: “introductory to medial” or “medial to terminal,” for example.
2. In the “phrases” section, the absolute phrase is the phrase that could become a complete sentence simply by adding the word “was” to it. Write that phrase.
3. (a) In the “phrases” section, the appositive phrase renames a noun. Write the appositive phrase. (b) What noun does the appositive rename?
4. Write the participial phrase that appears in the “phrases” section. Participial phrases begin with participles, which are usually –ing or –ed words.
5. In the “clauses” section, two of the added word groups are relative clauses. Relative clauses will (like adjectives) describe either people or things. Those relative clauses that describe people begin with the word “\_\_\_\_”; those relative clauses that describe things begin with the word “\_\_\_\_.”
6. In most cases, a sentence containing an adverbial clause can be flip-flopped; the two halves of the sentence trade places. Find the sentence containing the subordinate clause. Rewrite this sentence with the adverbial clause in the terminal position—*but without a comma*.

## Commas 6: The Phrases, the Clauses, and the Three Positions

We have learned about taking base sentences (a subject and a predicate) and adding words, phrases, and clauses to the introductory, medial, and terminal positions within that base sentence. To finalize our study of the first three comma rules, we will need to know:

1. which phrases and clauses can appear where, and
2. whether the phrases and clauses receive commas.

**Note:** Some of the statements about phrases and clauses that appear below are brief and sometimes a bit simplistic. This is because we are focusing on commas, not on phrases and clauses.

**Participial phrases** begin with –ing and –ed words. They can appear in any of the three positions, with commas. Examples:

- **Tripping on the hems of their gowns**, the handmaidens turn the corner too quickly.
- The handmaidens, **tripping on the hems of their gowns**, turn the corner too quickly.
- The handmaidens turn the corner too quickly, **tripping on the hems of their gowns**.

**Appositives** rename nouns. In the introductory position, appositives rename the noun to the right (the subject); in the medial or terminal positions, appositives rename the noun to the left. Examples:

- **The queen of the water**, *the goddess* assumes her trident.
- *The goddess*, **the queen of the water**, assumes her trident.
- The goddess assumes *her trident*, **the symbol of her royalty**.

**Relative clauses** beginning with “who” and “which” follow nouns, and therefore can appear only in medial and terminal positions. “Which” clauses always get commas; “who” clauses may appear with or without commas. Examples:

- *Our true nature*, **which is stained by labor**, preens its feathers.
- They coveted the honey of *Sappho*, **who would not denounce her vices**.

**Subordinate clauses** (also known as “adverbial” or “dependent” clauses) begin with words such as *after*, *although*, *as*, *because*, *before*, *if*, *since*, *so that*, *though*, *till*, *unless*, *until*, *when*, and *while*.

Introductory subordinate clauses receive commas, while terminal subordinate clauses do not. Examples:

- **After you drive them to the zoo**, you feed the children sweet rolls and melon.
- You feed the children sweet rolls and melon **after you drive them to the zoo**.

**note:** These are some of the more common phrases and clauses that require commas. A fuller listing would include others as well.

### Exercise 6:

1. Bathing in the water of freedom, the women of that era left behind the plow and the scullery. *The introductory participial phrase could be moved to appear after the word \_\_\_\_ or the word \_\_\_\_.*
2. *In the previous sentence, if the participial phrase were moved from the introductory to the medial position, the number of commas would change from \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_.*
3. The peach in your lap, a gift from the peach tree, will be placed on the windowsill. *The medial appositive can be moved to the \_\_\_\_ position, but it cannot be moved to the \_\_\_\_ position.*
4. The forty-year-old man, who has learned to close doors softly, rests on the stair landing. *The medial relative clause cannot be moved to either of the other two positions. Why not?*
5. A face blooms in the washroom mirror as you grope for the light switch. *This sentence contains a subordinate clause, yet needs no comma. Rewrite this sentence so that it does need a comma.*



## Commas 7: Multiple Comma Rules

We have learned that certain words, phrases, and clauses placed in the introductory, medial, and terminal positions require commas. So far, our examples have consisted of a base sentence with a single word, phrase, or clause added to it.

We will now see that the same principle that allows us to add single words, phrases, and clauses also allows us to add multiple words, phrases, and clauses.

For example, here is a sentence with words added to each of the three positions:

- Above the patiently waiting mules <sub>(1)</sub> the torn poster <sub>(2)</sub> crumpled from top to bottom <sub>(2)</sub> is beginning to reveal the once-hidden bricks <sub>(3)</sub> which ooze red color down to the rain-swept pavement.

In this sentence, three different word groups have been added to “the torn poster is beginning to reveal the once-hidden bricks.” Together, the three word groups require all three of the comma rules we have learned.

**Exercise 7:** Decide where commas would be placed in each of the following. Write the word before the comma, followed by the number 1, 2, or 3 to indicate the relevant comma rule. Use semicolons to separate each part of your answer. For example, if you were given the previous sentence about the torn poster, your answer would be:

- mules 1; poster 2; bottom 2; bricks 3
1. If my vessel sinks it may well be in answer to the eternal voices the waves that keep me from reaching you.
  2. Deciding against the chocolate malted Giulietta Masina the wife of Federico Fellini puts her poodle in a cab.
  3. When he didn't pick the rider as carefully as the horse we were all cheated of some marvelous experience which left us with no story to tell.
  4. In the mirrored light of the school gym the best slow dancer standing on her tip-toes dances within the confines of your arms pretending not to hear you count time to the music.
  5. The last trainees reluctantly moving one step higher climb the diving tower trembling on the wet rungs.

## Comma 8: Review of Comma Rules 1, 2, and 3

**Exercise 8:** Decide where commas would be placed in each of the following. Write the word before the comma, followed by the number 1, 2, or 3 to indicate the relevant comma rule. Example:

- The diggers rest on their shovels speaking softly in French.
- **answer:** shovels 3

Some sentences will contain multiple commas; for those sentences separate each portion of your answer with semicolons, as you did in exercise 7.

1. Holding her thin arms out from her sides she begins to dance.
2. The others follow shaking their fingers.
3. On the sheen of the still lake the floating loon sleeps.
4. The campers facing the southerly firebow of the sun gather their fire's fuel the dead branches that have fallen from the sky.
5. Under the high shade of fir trees they walked beside the stream wading through the ferns and the leaves.
6. Hurrying to find the larger sea the creek which now seemed younger gave promises of winter.
7. Half-frozen they knelt at the mouth of the creek watching the water spill over the silent stones.
8. Here is despair a painful sense of isolation and self-regard.
9. Destroyed by madness the best minds of the generation who sat up in the supernatural darkness dragged themselves through the streets at dawn.
10. On a busted rusty iron pole Jack Kerouac my companion sat beside me surrounded by the steel roots of trees.
11. I admired the perfect beauty of the sunflower the sweet natural eye to the new hip moon.
12. Sad I take the elevator and go down standing lost in calm thought.

## Commas 9: Items in a Series

So far our study of commas has focused on the first three comma rules. We now move on to comma rule #4: items in a series. Here is the standard configuration for items in a series:

- item A, item B, and item C

The commas that punctuate items in a series have a name: the “series comma.” Many professional publishers drop the final series comma; thus you will often see items in a series punctuated as *item A, item B and item C*. But in academic writing that final comma is mandatory. Always use it.

In addition to the standard configuration, two alternative methods exist. Each of the two alternative methods has its own name; since the standard method has no name, we will simply refer to it as “the normal way.” Here’s an example of standard items in a series:

- She had a slight accent <sup>(4)</sup> long black hair <sup>(4)</sup> and two frozen eyes. [*The “4” inside the parentheses represents “comma rule #4.”*]

A different arrangement of this same sentence can help us to see the pattern more clearly:

- She had . . .
  - **item 1:** a slight accent <sup>(4)</sup>
  - **item 2:** long black hair <sup>(4)</sup> *and*
  - **item 3:** two frozen eyes.

**Exercise 9, part 1:** Decide where rule #4 commas should be placed in the following sentences. Simply write the words that appear to the left of commas. For example, the answer to the example above would be **accent hair**.

1. The leafy tendrils lifted the grasses the floating Nebulous and the arms of the trees.
2. The solid scholars get the degrees the jobs and the dollars.
3. You gathered your strength caught your breath and cried with your full lung power.

**Exercise 9, part 2:** For part 2, write the first word of item 1, of item 2, and of item 3. For example, the answer to the bulleted example above would be **a long two**.

4. My father was a demon of frustrated dreams a breaker of trust and a poor thin boy with bad luck.
5. I sort through piles of old canceled checks old clippings and yellow note cards that meant something once.
6. It always turned out funny weird and helpful.

## Commas 10: Increasing Word-Count and Number

The simplest of series is a series of three one-word items: *shake, rattle, and roll*. Most series, however, offer greater complexity than this simple example.

In these exercises we are using the more formal term “items in a series.” However, what we are referring to as “items in a series” can also be referred to more informally as “lists.”

Two ways we can increase the complexity of our series are (1) by increasing the word-count of the items in the series and (2) by increasing the number of items in the series.

With items in a series (lists), it is usually best to place longer and more significant items last.

- **size (more words per item):** You may find yourself consumed with a free-floating shame, a hopelessness about your work, and the realization that you will have to throw out everything you’ve done so far and start from scratch.
- **number (more than three items):** He went into a restaurant, took a menu to study, pocketed half a dozen cubes of sugar, drank cold good water, ate a roll, found the menu flat and unprofitable, and left between the busboy and the waiter.

**Exercise 10, part 1:** Copy each of the following; for each, add a third item that meets the designated word count. Underline each of your added items.

1. He described then how he backed his truck up to the edge of the pit, set the chains to the axle, and *[add a third item of 5 or more words]*.
2. Write about the women’s curlers with the bristles inside, your cousin’s perfect Brownie uniforms, and *[add a third item of 7 or more words]*.
3. The Sea of Faith beckons you to dive into its blue and magic waters, swim like a fish down to the bottom, and *[add a third item of 9 or more words]*.

**Exercise 10, part 2:** Copy each of the following, adding underlined items to each series.

4. We found them among dishes, dolls, lost shoes, and *[add a fourth item of 4 or more words]*.
5. A code bologna sandwich meant one or two slices of bologna, mustard, one wilted piece of iceberg lettuce, *[add a fourth item of 5 or more words]*, and *[add a fifth item of 5 or more words]*.
6. So I become a dog with a chew toy, worrying it for a while, wrestling it to the ground, flinging it over my shoulder, *[add a fourth item of 3 or more words]*, *[add a fifth item of 5 or more words]*, and *[add a sixth item of 7 or more words]*.



# Commas 11: Other Conjunctions, Repeated Words, and Sentences in a Series

## Other Conjunctions

In all of the series we have used so far, the conjunction “and” is the conjunction that has appeared just before the final item. However, two other conjunctions—“or” and “but”—can be used as well. Examples:

- What happens to their posture when they are thinking, bored, or afraid?
- In thirty years I expect to be older, less confident, but out of debt.

**Exercise 11, part 1:** Copy each sentence; add conjunctions and third items according to the instructions. In each, underline the words you add.

1. As gifts, we might be given visions of rainy crowds in glistening cities, of sunlight crossing the loud corners, *[add the conjunction “or” and a third item of at least six words]*.
2. After the thud on the window pane, we found the bird stunned, motionless, *[add the conjunction “but” and a third item of at least six words]*.

## Repeated Words

When constructing items in a series, writers may take license to repeat key words for stylistic effect. For example:

- They try to make you feel shameful because you won’t do what they want, see them more often, or try to become successful.

This same sentence can be rewritten so that the key word “won’t” begins each of the three items:

- They try to make you feel shameful because you **won’t** do what they want, **won’t** be more successful, and **won’t** see them more often.

Another example:

- Writing can help you soften, wake you up, and get you to start paying attention.

This same sentence can be rewritten so that the key word “can” begins each of the three items:

- Writing **can** help you soften, **can** wake you up, and **can** get you to start paying attention.

**Exercise 11, part 2:** Copy each sentence; repeat words according to the instructions.

3. They are what our friends tell us in their pain, joy, rage, and cry against injustice. *[Repeat and underline the word “their” in items two, three, and four.]*
4. Now there are no conventions, donors, hats in the ring, and promises we always knew were never meant to be kept. *[Repeat and underline the word “no” in items two, three, and four.]*

## Sentences in a Series

By trying to use a mere comma to link two sentences, we are guilty of creating the error known as the “run-on sentence.” Oddly enough, when we then add a third sentence, we turn our would-be run-on into a stylish “sentences in a series.” Note, though, that this device is usually reserved for sentences that are short and simple.

The pattern for sentences in a series looks like this: *Sentence, sentence, and sentence.* Example:

- Upstairs the floors sometimes tremble, the clothes go damp in the closets, and the whole place threatens to come down.

**Exercise 11, part 3:** Copy each sentence; add third items to each.

5. Horses dance in the warm rain, pheasants croak on the meadows, and *[add an underlined third-item short sentence]*.
6. There was rain, the rivers rose, and *[add an underlined third-item short sentence]*.

## Commas 12: Polysyndeton and Asyndeton

In the three previous lessons, we have been using the “normal” method of constructing items in a series. Now we will visit the other two methods—*polysyndeton* and *asyndeton*. The Greek roots tell us that “polysyndeton” means “many conjunctions” and that “asyndeton” means “no conjunctions.” Here are the two patterns:

- **polysyndeton:** item 1 and item 2 and item 3
- **asyndeton:** item 1, item 2, item 3

You might have a tendency to resist the idea of asyndeton, thinking perhaps that dropping the conjunction before the final item is not permissible. If so, start looking for asyndeton in your reading. You’ll be surprised to discover that, though you might be uncomfortable with it at first, you’ve probably encountered it hundreds of times before.

And here is an example of each:

- **polysyndeton:** She had a slight accent **and** long black hair **and** two frozen eyes.
- **asyndeton:** She had a slight accent <sub>(4)</sub> long black hair <sub>(4)</sub> two frozen eyes.

Note the close relationship between the comma and the conjunction “and.” The two are often interchangeable. In fact, writers do have the option of taking a sentence with a compound verb—like “The wolf gobbles up the grandmother and dresses in her pajamas”—and rewriting it as “The wolf gobbles up the grandmother, dresses in her pajamas.”

**Exercise 12, part 1:** Each of the following sentences contains items in a series in the “normal” pattern. Rewrite each sentence in the polysyndeton pattern.

1. The solid scholars get the degrees, the jobs, and the dollars.
2. You backed away, caught your breath, and cried with your full lung power.
3. Good-bye to Flattery’s fawning face, to Grandeur with his wise grimace, to upstart Wealth’s averted eye, to crowded halls, to court and street, to frozen hearts, and to hasting feet.

**Exercise 12, part 2:** Each of the following sentences contains items in a series in the “normal” pattern. Rewrite each sentence in the asyndeton pattern.

4. I sort through piles of old canceled checks, old clippings, and yellow note cards that meant something once.
5. It always turned out funny, weird, and helpful.
6. In one day ten years ago I dug fourteen small trees, wrapped the roots in burlap, dragged them down from the top ridge of the hill, spaced them carefully, and watered them each day for one whole season.

## Commas 13: Review of Comma Rules 1-4

**Exercise 13, part 1:** Here in part 1 we will review comma rule 4 only. Decide where commas should be placed in the following sentences. Write the word that would appear to the left of each comma. In the case of polysyndeton, the correct answer is “no commas.” Example:

➤ She had a slight accent long black hair and two frozen eyes.

➤ **answer:** accent hair

1. I haven't read one book memorized one plot or found a mind that did not doubt.
2. I walk along defending myself to people or exchanging repartee with them or rationalizing my behavior or seducing them with gossip or pretending I'm on their TV talk show or whatever.
3. If only there had been one saffron Buddhist to teach us how to sit still just one Tibetan lama just one Taoist just one Zen just one Thomas Merton Trappist just one saint in the wilderness of Waco USA.
4. You can still discover new treasures under all those piles clean things up edit things out fix things get a grip.

**Exercise 13, part 2:** Here in part 2 we will review comma rules 1, 2, 3, and 4. Decide where commas should be placed in the following sentences. Write the word that would appear to the left of each comma and the rule number of that comma. Use semicolons to separate answers that contain multiple commas. Use the answer “no commas” when appropriate. Example:

➤ When pear and cherry bloom go down in showers the early petal-fall is past.

➤ **answer:** showers 1

5. Lining the corridors in silent chairs they gaze at the broken television.
6. She lifts each page slightly at the corner readying herself to turn it.
7. The basket reappeared stuffed with apples.
8. The book must tell of children toiling for bread and pennies in a textile mill and tender brothers doomed to sharpen their bayonets in opposing armies.
9. Her vision in the woods a woman with a doe's ears accompanied her last breaths like a song of dying.
10. The wandering child who is past being tired tramples through the waist-deep grasses.
11. Their cares are small gray infinite.
12. Under the locked and darkened grille the animals are crying.
13. She didn't mind the squalor of axles oily pans caked-on grease and incessant flies.

## Commas 14: Two Adjectives

- Welcome to the silly <sub>(5)</sub> comforting poem.

In the sentence above, “poem” is a thing, a noun. “Comforting” is an adjective describing the poem; “silly” is also an adjective describing the poem.

- ✓ **comma rule 5:** When two side-by-side adjectives are to the left of a noun—and both adjectives are modifying that same noun—the two adjectives are separated by a comma.

We use the rule #5 comma whenever we produce three words in this sequence: **adjective** <sub>(5)</sub> **adjective noun**.

Do not confuse the “two-adjectives” comma with the “items-in-a-series” comma. With rule #5 we place a comma between the two adjectives, but *not* between the second adjective and the noun: adjective <sub>(here)</sub> adjective <sub>(but not here)</sub> noun.

Here are two more examples:

- The fierce <sub>(5)</sub> cold air rushed in to fill them out like bushes thick with leaves.
- Thoreau lifted out two hands full of wriggling <sub>(5)</sub> resurrected crickets.

When working with comma rule #5, both present and past participles are included among the adjectives that appear to the left of nouns. In “wriggling, resurrected crickets,” “wriggling” is a present participle and “resurrected” is a past participle.

**Exercise 14, part 1:** In each of the sentences below, determine where a rule #5 comma would be placed. Write the word that would appear to the left of the comma.

1. We surprised one day a proud spotted pigeon.
2. The ice had magnified the thickened radiant veins of the forewings.
3. The exquisite sea and sky mobilized their heavy blue currents.
4. The voice of a child emerged from the tall bearded man.

**Exercise 14, part 2:**

5. In number 1 above, what noun is being described by the two adjectives?
6. In number 2 above, what noun is being described by the two adjectives?
7. In number 3 above, what noun is being described by the two adjectives?
8. In number 4 above, what noun is being described by the two adjectives?



## Commas 15: Commas and “And”

The rule #5 comma is interchangeable with the conjunction “and.” Wherever we could write “adjective **and** adjective noun,” we can write “adjective **comma** adjective noun”—and vice versa. Here are some examples:

- The **unpainted and plain** boards held the barn upright.
- The **unpainted, plain** boards held the barn upright.
- Scatter the **good-natured and untidy flowers** upon the graves.
- Scatter the **good-natured, untidy flowers** upon the graves.

So “and” and “,” are interchangeable. We can call this interchangeability “the *and* test.” The “and” test can help us determine those situations in which we have two adjectives to the left of a noun, yet no comma should be used.

Both “unpainted, plain boards” and “six plain boards” follow the “adjective adjective noun pattern,” yet the first example receives a comma while the second example does not. This is because in the first example “unpainted” describes “boards.” But in the second example, “six” does not describe “boards”; it describes “plain boards.” The “and” test exposes such situations: we would not say “six and plain boards”; therefore, we would not write “six, plain boards.”

**Exercise 15, part 1:** For each of the following, write only the “adjective, adjective noun” portion of the sentence. For three of your answers, place a comma after the first adjective. One of the answers fails the “and” test; for that answer, use no comma.

1. He realized that no one should lie forever with such a huge lifeless thing.
2. Staring down at us was a strange fluttering bird.
3. Their brittle hind legs bent as if to jump.
4. Yet the trim feisty moth has not a drop of self-pity.

**Exercise 15, part 2:** For numbers 5, 6, and 7, choose the three sentences from part 1 that do require a rule #5 comma. But this time write them (the complete sentence) with an “and” in place of the comma. In each, underline the conjunction “and.”

5. One of the part 1 sentences with “and” instead of a comma.
6. Another of the part 1 sentences with “and” instead of a comma.
7. Another of the part 1 sentences with “and” instead of a comma.

## Commas 16: Compound Sentences

Here is the pattern for comma rule #6:

- Sentence <sub>(6)</sub> conjunction sentence.
- **example:** The west lights fade, and stars come out in heaven.

Now let's apply the pattern to the example sentence:

- First there is a sentence ("The west lights fade"); then there is a comma; then there is a conjunction ("and"); then there is a second sentence ("stars come out in heaven").

We are using the term "sentence" to describe the words that appear on the left side and on the right side of these compound sentences. The term "independent clause" means the same as "sentence"; therefore, saying that a comma and a conjunction can join two *sentences* is the same as saying that a comma and a conjunction can join two *independent clauses*.

Assuming we already know what a sentence is, the only other necessary information is the list of conjunctions. In reality, these are the *coordinating conjunctions*, and there are seven. The mnemonic device FANBOYS can help us to memorize them:

- **For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So**

**Exercise 16:** In each of the following sentences, decide where commas would be placed. Then write the word that appears to the left. For the bulleted example above, the answer would be "fade."

1. Now he is wondrously willing for he has run through all the story of the Prodigal.
2. Frail sticks of grass poke her ankles and a wet froth of spiders touches her legs like wet fingers.
3. We should not despise trivial loss nor should we despise trivial gain.
4. We contended daily but the strife could not be ended.
5. The steep hill will keep you company or you can climb it for some breathtaking views.
6. His boots are bright already yet still he rubs until they are his mirror.
7. A while ago I saw her dressed in green so I will woo her in a field that is all grass.

## Commas 17: Checking the Sentences

We have seen that comma rule #6 sentences contain a comma and a conjunction in the middle. To the left and to the right of the comma + conjunction are sentences. But when we have less than a sentence—on either the left-hand or the right-hand side—we don't actually have a compound sentence. Therefore:

- ✓ **If either the words to the left or the right of the comma + conjunction are less than a complete sentence, don't use a comma.**

**example 1:** My mind hovered over my baby like a raptor and it froze everything it saw.

**example 2:** My mind hovered over my baby like a raptor and froze everything it saw.

1. In example 1, is the left-hand word group ("My mind hovered over my baby like a raptor") a complete sentence?
2. In example 1, is the right-hand word group ("it froze everything it saw") a complete sentence?
3. In example 2, is the left-hand word group ("My mind hovered over my baby like a raptor") a complete sentence?
4. In example 2, is the right-hand word group ("froze everything it saw") a complete sentence?

Whenever the answer to any of the above questions is "No," that sentence is not a compound sentence and does not receive a comma. The answers to the above questions are yes – yes – yes – no. Therefore, example 1 is a compound sentence and is punctuated with a rule #6 comma; example 2 is not a compound sentence and does not receive a comma.

### Exercise 17:

**example A:** I gather a froth on my gums and grin the way an old woman grimaces in a morning mirror.

1. In example A, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?
2. In example A, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?
3. Therefore, does the example A sentence receive a rule #6 comma?

**example B:** No honor is given to the plow and the fields have gone to ruin.

4. In example B, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?
5. In example B, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?
6. Therefore, does the example B sentence receive a rule #6 comma?

**example C:** The rule applies to the jack of all hearts and especially to the queen of baguettes.

7. In example C, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?
8. In example C, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?
9. Therefore, does the example C sentence receive a rule #6 comma?

## Commas 18: Individual Conjunctions—For, Or, Nor

### Exercise 18:

“And” is a conjunction we are all familiar with, so let’s take a closer look at the other six conjunctions. We’ll look at three in this lesson and three more in the next.

### FOR

“For” means “because.” When “because” joins two sentences, it receives no comma. (“Because” is a member of another group of conjunctions—the subordinating conjunctions.) But when “for” joins two sentences, it does receive a comma. In summary, any sentence pair joined by “because” could just as easily be joined by “comma + for.”

1. You couldn’t decipher your homework because it was soaked in the rain. Rewrite this sentence as a compound sentence.  
*[Change the conjunction to “for” and punctuate correctly.]*

### OR

In most cases, the conjunction “or” implies a degree of uncertainty. To provide the appropriate uncertainty, helping verbs such as *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, and *should* often appear alongside the conjunction “or.”

Examine statements A and B:

**statement A:** Doris loved the stuffed mushrooms on her plate.

**statement B:** Doris loved what the others were having.

Now if *both* of these statements were true, we would use “and.” However, what if it were obvious to us that Doris loved something that was there at the table, but we can’t be sure which item it was? This is where “or”—with the

addition of a word like “may”—comes in handy:

- Doris **may** have loved the stuffed mushrooms on her plate, **or** she **may** have loved what the others were having.

**statement A:** This has all the appearances of madness.

**statement B:** This is just coincidence.

2. Combine statements A and B into a single compound sentence joined by “or.” Make whatever changes are necessary so that the reader knows that one of the two statements is true, but not both. Punctuate correctly.

### NOR

“Nor” has two requirements that the other conjunctions do not have: (1) a negative word (probably “not”) must appear in the left-hand sentence and (2) the first two words of the right-hand sentence flip-flop their normal word order.

Let’s take “I can live with you” as our left-hand sentence and “I can live without you” as our right-hand sentence. In order to use “nor” as our conjunction, we must (1) add “not” to the left-hand sentence and (2) flip-flop the words “I can” in the right-hand sentence. As a final product, we get this:

- I **cannot** live with you, nor **can I** live without you.
3. Take *Much that is known is revealed to us* as your left-hand sentence; take *we are told fables of women that excelled of old* as your right-hand sentence. Using steps (1) and (2) described above, combine your left-hand and right-hand sentences into a single compound sentence using “nor.”



# Commas 19: Individual Conjunctions—But, Yet, So

## Exercise 19:

### BUT

In the previous lesson and exercise we learned that if the right-hand word group is less than a sentence, we don't use a comma. "But," however, is an exception to this rule. Because "but" presents a contrast (while "and" does not present a contrast), "but" can receive a comma even when the right-hand word group is less than a complete sentence.

**example A:** I dreamed that your hair deserted you and came for me while wrapped in its funeral ribbons.

**example B:** I dreamed that your hair deserted you but came for me while wrapped in its funeral ribbons.

1. (a) Example A receives no comma. Why not?  
(b) Example B *can* receive a comma. Why?

### YET

In a majority of cases, "yet" and "but" can be used interchangeably. There is, however, one slight difference. While both words show contrast, "yet" shows (more so than "but") that the contrast is surprising. Examples:

**example A:** *Bartram watered his radish seeds daily, but his neighbor simply let the rain water the garden for him.* (A contrast, yes, but not really surprising—just two different approaches to getting the watering done.)

**example B:** *Bartram watered his radish seeds daily, yet not one single plant ever grew.* (Wow, that is surprising. Usually seeds that get watered will sprout.)

- The roller coaster is engulfed in flames, \_\_\_\_\_ the riders continue to fling their arms straight up into the air.
2. For the "roller coaster" sentence, would you use the conjunction "but" or the conjunction "yet"? Why?

### SO

Earlier, when studying "for," we learned that "for" is a coordinating conjunction while "because" is a subordinating conjunction. For our study of "so," we will revisit these same two groups of conjunctions:

- **"So"** is a coordinating conjunction; it expresses a cause-and-effect relationship.
- **"So that"** is a subordinating conjunction; it also expresses a cause-and-effect relationship.

So what is the difference? The "so that" relationship is *intentional*. Examples:

- **example A:** They had hit Ruben with their high beams, so Ruben had to bring his van to a stop.
- **example B:** They had hit Ruben with their high beams so that Ruben would have to bring his van to a stop.

Notice two differences between examples A and B: (1) The difference of *intention*: In example A, we assume that those in the other car are just negligent; they are unaware of what they are doing. But in example B, those in the other car *want* Ruben to stop, so they put their high beams on *purposely*. (2) "So" gets a comma, while "so that" does not get a comma.

- The owners of the plantation let the bananas rot in the train cars \_\_\_\_\_ the price of bananas will be driven upwards.
  - A complete trainload of bananas has rotted \_\_\_\_\_ the price of bananas has gone up.
3. Copy each of the above sentence pairs. Connect one of them with a comma + "so"; connect the other with "so that" and no comma. In one sentence, underline "so"; in the other sentence, underline "so that."

## Commas 20: Review of Comma Rule #6

**Exercise 20:** For each of the following, write only what would replace the blank. For 14 of the 16 answers, make a comma, followed by one of the seven conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet so). Each conjunction needs to be used twice. The other two sentences are not compound sentences at all. For those two, write “and” without a comma. (So “and” will get used four times altogether.)

1. A window to the east will serve as well as a window to the west \_\_\_\_ the eastern sky echoes the western sky.
2. Four flaming angels crouched on the hood \_\_\_\_ the world did not collapse.
3. He might be insulting the sky \_\_\_\_ he might only be letting go a bit of green molded plastic soldier tied to a parachute.
4. I am not Prince Hamlet \_\_\_\_ was I meant to be.
5. It is raining again this morning \_\_\_\_ I am remembering that it rained then, too.
6. It's morning come again \_\_\_\_ she begins to sing above the soup.
7. My dreams alone I remember \_\_\_\_ I see them at night.
8. My wife wakes me with a shove \_\_\_\_ commences to try her sorry Deutsch with me.
9. Never from pure heaven have there fallen so many fires \_\_\_\_ have such menacing comets burned.
10. Nothing gave but the wall's sharp echo \_\_\_\_ I swung again in anger.
11. She notices that he's made it halfway \_\_\_\_ she can't stop the cars rushing towards him.
12. Some days I stand here until I lose my focus \_\_\_\_ drift off out of the moment.
13. The chemist said it would be all right \_\_\_\_ I've never been the same.
14. The dial stirs \_\_\_\_ none perceive that it moves.
15. The wound she gives may not be healed \_\_\_\_ I have fled over plains and hills for refuge from so dangerous a lady.
16. You should let me alone now \_\_\_\_ I will show you the savage green sprouting through the obscene holes of your eyes.

## Commas 21: Review of Comma Rules 5 and 6

**Exercise 21:** Decide where commas would be placed in each of the following. Write the word before the comma, followed by the number 5 (for two adjectives) or 6 (for a compound sentence) to indicate the relevant comma rule. Example:

- The west lights fade and stars come out in heaven.
- **answer:** fade 6

The answer “no comma” will be used twice.

In #3 below, the comma would be placed *inside* the quotation mark.

1. From a bare patch of that poor solitary soil sprang the flower.
2. I would not wear the shepherd's frock nor would I bear the shepherd's crook.
3. Little Bill and I sang “Your Cheatin’ Heart” for a sudden quiet had put a hard edge on the morning.
4. Our hands may bleed but we do not all die.
5. Parents open their shutters and call the lonely happy child home.
6. That was illusion and I wanted it to dwell with us there.
7. The austere and silent sun rode above.
8. The bored crazy woman at the counter rented me the Taurus.
9. They are beautiful to look at yet they are tricky.
10. This disruption of our union with visible nature disturbs the passions or it perplexes the intellects of man.
11. This dog responds tenderly to a friendly voice so I will honor this dog with praise and favor.

## Commas 22: Multiple Comma Rules

Throughout this series of exercises, we have focused on one rule per sentence. But in actual writing, we find that many sentences require knowledge of multiple comma rules. An example:

- Uncle Vess, a lover of great gobs of vinegar sauce, welcomed the high pressure, the little pills, and the doctor.

This sentence contains an example of comma rule #2 and of comma rule #4. The appositive phrase “dousing his plate with vinegar sauce” appears between the subject (“Uncle Vess”) and the verb (“welcomed”) and receives a pair of rule #2 commas. Two rule #4 commas separate the three items in a series that conclude the sentence.

- Swelling and ebbing with time, people are like a great tide, and all their works will dissolve.

This sentence contains an example of comma rule #1 and of comma rule #6. The participial phrase “swelling and ebbing with time” precedes the subject “people” and receives a rule #1 comma. The conjunction “but” separates two complete sentences and receives a rule #6 comma.

When analyzing the commas in a compound sentence, consider the left-hand sentence as a unit separate unto itself; then consider the right-hand sentence as a unit separate unto itself.

**Exercise 22:** Simply write the two rule numbers that apply to each of the following sentences. Your answer to the first example above would be 1, 4; your answer to the second example would be 1, 6. The rules: (1) introductory (2) medial (3) terminal (4) items in a series (5) two adjectives (6) compound sentences.

1. Although I did not understand a word they were saying, their sound surrounds me, falling on my shoulders and hair.
2. Because we refuse to send it a blessing, murk, mud, and the floral extravagance of wet sand drip from the giant hand.
3. Everywhere the helpless, harnessed bodies hung, treading air like water.
4. Goliath’s head, swinging by its hair, wears the artist’s own weary expression, exhausted of everything but its yearning.
5. I try tearing paper into tiny, perfect squares, but they cut my fingers.
6. The polar caps were melting, and the water was advancing, swallowing all the old landmarks.
7. The building, standing up the hill by the Carmel road, beheld strange growths, changes, and ghastly fallings.
8. The child was bright in his basket, so his mother, bending above him, sang a lullaby in a liquid tongue.
9. The swamps were melted down to molten mud, and the cells uncoupled, recombined, and madly multiplied.

# Commas Practice Test

## Tips:

- ✓ If there are rule #2 commas, there will be two of them; if there are rule #4 commas, there will be *at least* two of them.
- ✓ Occasionally the answer will be “no commas.” This will most likely be the case with sentences that may look like compound sentences but aren’t or with polysyndeton (*item and item and item*) or with two adjectives joined by “and” instead of a comma.
- ✓ For some of these sentences, only one comma rule applies; for others, two comma rules apply.

Decide where commas would be placed in each of the following. Write the word before each comma, followed by the number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 to indicate the relevant comma rule. In the case of multiple commas, separate each word/rule number with a semicolon. Example:

- The diggers rest on their cold rusted shovels speaking softly in French.
- **answer:** cold 5; shovels 3

**rule 1:** introductory

**rule 2:** medial

**rule 3:** terminal

**rule 4:** items in a series

**rule 5:** two adjectives

**rule 6:** compound sentences

1. After the climate had turned sour the desperate solitary fantasy changed into nothing more than fence-sitting.
2. His brown skin hung in strips like full-blown roses stained with the losses of age.
3. I will try to bring order from this disorder yet I will enjoy the freedom that now eludes my grasp knowing that the river will continue to flow.
4. Perhaps there are more apples left to pick but I am done with apple-picking now.
5. She would fly far away into the sky and never fly again to my straw bed.
6. The cold familiar wind shakes the branches all about them.
7. The frightening gills fresh and crisp with blood breathed in the terrible oxygen that can cut so badly.
8. Though we might stumble under its load we all bear Hope’s burden.
9. While the children run the grandmothers bask in the twilight sun.
10. Christopher Columbus having learned that the living sea contains no dragons that gnaw on drowned sailors’ brains begged that he be buried with his chains.
11. I thought of the coarse flesh the big bones the little bones the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails and the pink swim-bladder.
12. My two-pointed ladder is nowhere to be seen nor are there any barrels left to fill.
13. She scratches on my window and tosses her hair and snares lightning and hawks and swarms of butterflies.
14. Snow and mud went flying splashing the girls.
15. The deep and chill evening thickens after each lightning flash.
16. This print of mine which has kept its color alive through so many cleanings continues to serve me as the clothes I wear to work to bed and to my grave.
17. We find mottled clouds patches of standing water the scattering of tall trees.

# Commas Final Test

Decide where commas would be placed in each of the following. Write the word before each comma, followed by the number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 to indicate the relevant comma rule. In the case of multiple commas, separate each word/rule number with a semicolon. Example:

- The diggers rest on their cold rusted shovels speaking softly in French.
- **answer:** cold 5; shovels 3

**rule 1:** introductory

**rule 2:** medial

**rule 3:** terminal

**rule 4:** items in a series

**rule 5:** two adjectives

**rule 6:** compound sentences

1. As the clouds continue to darken I swim this narrow swift river.
2. He has something important to tell me yet his mouth spits mud when he tries to talk.
3. His French Mademoiselle is a stout plain disciple.
4. Moving in the dark the wind sweeps across the water.
5. My father races past barn and field and silo ripping furrows in the backroads.
6. Stricken with foreboding they pleaded and got angry but still she was silent.
7. The firelight playing on the leaning walls dies down and is lost.
8. The thin fragile bridge traversed the river which was wide and swift.
9. There's no one to say whether the shy quiet people intended religion or magic or made their tracings into art.
10. This mechanism which took life when the various sections assembled themselves together seeks the healing of time of patience and of a difficult repentance.
11. Happiness lands its single-engine plane on a grassy strip hitchhikes into town and inquires at every door until he finds you.
12. Greta Garbo a political officer in Paris listens attentively to a voice from the next room.
13. He wriggled and wriggled till at last he had come down from the high unimaginable hook.
14. The monarchs were perplexed with fear yet the archangel shone above them sending thunderous rain to the earth below.
15. My brain is being battered by this music which does its best to destroy the gray matter within my skull.
16. Shrieking with ape excitement they danced around the pit flinging sharp flints in vain.
17. The ambulance pulsing out red light like an artery floats down past beacons dips down and brakes speed.
18. The human child goes away to the waters and the wild for the world's more full of weeping than we can understand.
19. She whispered to me so that my eyes turned backward in their sockets.
20. This invites the occult mind cancels our physics with a sneer and spatters all we know across the wicked convenient stones.
21. Today the tide is low and the black shells of mussels which are exposed to the risk of air wave in and out of the waterline.
22. When they met a goose they ran fearfully away.

# ANSWER KEYS

## Commas 1—Introduction

### Exercise 1 [sample answers]

1. Whistling a tune from long ago, **Smokey performed a miracle.**
2. Until you see the bus rounding the corner, **you wonder if you'll be late today.**
3. Yesterday, **all my troubles seemed so far away.**
4. In the attic behind a bag of old clothes, **we discovered an Etch-a-Sketch.**
5. After the wolf gobbled up the grandmother and dressed in her pajamas, **Little Red Riding Hood knocked on the cottage door.**

## Commas 2: Medial Commas

### Exercise 2

1. **a)** which is built in the tower of a castle **b)** The Baron's laboratory has all the equipment necessary for creating life.
2. **a)** leaving their histories at the door **b)** The brothers and sisters enter the dream house.
3. **a)** working his little row of silver bells **b)** The man with the ice-cream cart stops opposite my window.
4. **a)** which had been trapped within the room **b)** The dazed starling at last found the opened window.

## Commas 3: Terminal Commas

### Exercise 3

1. Beautifully costumed in Renaissance brocade, the actors perform their duties upon the stage. **introductory**
2. From the vast echo-chamber of the gym, the bounced basketball sounds like a leather whip. **introductory**

3. The snow flurries about, stinging our nostrils as the wind lifts it from the beach. **terminal**
4. He stood at the back of the boat, a youth in purple pants. **terminal**
5. Driving at right angles to the wind, the clouds create a postcard-like picture. **introductory**
6. The pear tree grew in the garden, bearing much less fruit this year than the year before. **terminal**

## Commas 4: The Long Prepositional Phrase

### Exercise 4

- On a length of nylon fishline, the gull strangles.
- Into the freshest deep spiraling grass, the puppies dive nose first.
- Along the road to death's open door, we march like prisoners who are forced into their day's labor.

## Commas 5: Words, Phrases, and Clauses

### Exercise 5

1. The apple of knowledge should not be confused with plain bread, **Denise**. —*medial to terminal* [sample answer]
2. that ancient kiss still burning on your lips
3. (a) the men who worked the second shift (b) Loners (or, the Loners)
4. Limited by light
5. who, which
6. The small creatures maintain their assurance though the cold may freeze them.

## Commas 6: The Phrases, the Clauses, and the Three Positions

### Exercise 6:

1. women, scullery
2. 1 to 2
3. introductory, terminal
4. It cannot go in the introductory position because it must come after “the forty-year-old man” it refers to; it cannot go in the terminal position because it cannot be separated from “the forty-year-old man” it refers to.
5. As you grope for the light switch, a face blooms in the washroom mirror.

## Commas 7: Multiple Comma Rules

### Exercise 7

1. sinks 1; voices 3
2. malted 1; Masina 2; Fellini 2
3. horse 1; experience 3
4. gym 1; dancer 2; (tip-)toes 2; arms 3
5. trainees 2; higher 2; tower 3

## Comma 8: Review of Comma Rules 1, 2, and 3

### Exercise 8

1. sides 1
2. follow 3
3. lake 1
4. campers 2; sun 2; fuel 3
5. trees 1; stream 3
6. sea 1; creek 2; now 2
7. (Half-)frozen 1; creek 3
8. despair 3
9. madness 1; generation 2; darkness 2
10. pole 1; Kerouac 2; companion 2; me 3
11. sunflower 3
12. Sad 1; down 3

## Commas 9: Items in a Series

### Exercise 9, part 1

1. grasses Nebulous
2. degrees jobs
3. strength breath

### Exercise 9, part 2

4. a a a
5. piles old yellow
6. funny weird helpful



## Commas 10: Increasing Word-Count and Number

### Exercise 10, part 1 [sample answers]

1. He described then how he backed his truck up to the edge of the pit, set the chains to the axle, and *[add a third item of 5 or more words]* **threw the stick down into first gear.**
2. Write about the women's curlers with the bristles inside, your cousin's perfect Brownie uniforms, and *[add a third item of 7 or more words]* **the shiny yellow rain coat your mother would put on you on rainy days.**
3. The Sea of Faith beckons you to dive into its blue and magic waters, swim like a fish down to the bottom, and *[add a third item of 9 or more words]* **explore the bottom for pearls or coral or shells.**

### Exercise 10, part 2 [sample answers]

4. We found them among dishes, dolls, lost shoes, and *[add a fourth item of 4 or more words]* **piles of junk mail and unpaid bills.**
5. A code bologna sandwich meant one or two slices of bologna, mustard, one wilted piece of iceberg lettuce, *[add a fourth item of 5 or more words]* **a thin slice of a yellow onion,** and *[add a fifth item of 5 or more words]* **some unevenly spread dill relish.**
6. So I become a dog with a chew toy, worrying it for a while, wrestling it to the ground, flinging it over my shoulder, *[add a fourth item of 3 or more words]* **setting it on my paws,** *[add a fifth item of 5 or more words]* **drooling some slobber on it,** and *[add a sixth item of 7 or more words]* **flinging it across the room where it gets lost behind the armoire.**

## Commas 11: Other Conjunctions, Repeated Words, and Sentences in a Series

### Exercise 11, part 1 [sample answers]

1. As gifts, we might be given visions of rainy crowds in glistening cities, of sunlight crossing the loud corners, *[add the conjunction "or" and a third item of at least six words]* **or of white clouds ascending to the heavens above.**
2. After the thud on the window pane, we found the bird stunned, motionless, *[add the conjunction "but" and a third item of at least six words]* **but still capable of planning its escape.**

### Exercise 11, part 2

3. They are what our friends tell us in their pain, **their** joy, **their** rage, and **their** cry against injustice.
4. Now there are no conventions, **no** donors, **no** hats in the ring, and **no** promises we always knew were never meant to be kept.

### Exercise 11, part 3 [sample answers]

5. Horses dance in the warm rain, pheasants croak on the meadows, and *[add a third-item short sentence]* **frogs cavort in the pond.**
6. There was rain, the rivers rose, and *[add a third-item short sentence]* **the sky darkened.**

## Commas 12: Polysyndeton and Asyndeton

### Exercise 12, part 1

1. The solid scholars get the degrees **and** the jobs **and** the dollars.
2. You backed away **and** caught your breath **and** cried with your full lung power.
3. Good-bye to Flattery's fawning face **and** to Grandeur with his wise grimace **and** to upstart Wealth's averted eye **and** to crowded halls **and** to court and street **and** to frozen hearts **and** to hasting feet.

### Exercise 12, part 2

4. I sort through piles of old canceled checks, old clippings, yellow note cards that meant something once.
5. It always turned out funny, weird, helpful.
6. In one day ten years ago I dug fourteen small trees, wrapped the roots in burlap, dragged them down from the top ridge of the hill, spaced them carefully, watered them each day for one whole season.

## Commas 13: Review of Comma Rules 1-4

### Exercise 13, part 1

1. book plot
2. no comma
3. still lama Taoist Zen Trappist
4. piles up out things

### Exercise 13, part 2

5. chairs 1
6. corner 3
7. reappeared 3
8. no commas
9. woods 2; ears 2
10. child 2; tired 2
11. small 4; gray 4
12. grille 1
13. axles 4; pans 4; grease 4

## Commas 14: Two Adjectives

### Exercise 14, part 1

1. proud
2. thickened
3. heavy
4. tall

### Exercise 14, part 2

5. pigeon
6. veins
7. currents
8. man

## Commas 15: Commas and “And”

### Exercise 15, part 1

1. huge, lifeless thing
2. strange, fluttering bird
3. brittle hind legs
4. trim, feisty moth

### Exercise 15, part 2

5. He realized that no one should lie forever with such a huge and lifeless thing.
6. Staring down at us was a strange and fluttering bird.
7. Yet the trim and feisty moth has not a drop of self-pity.

## Commas 16: Compound Sentences

### Exercise 16

1. willing
2. ankles
3. loss
4. daily
5. company
6. yet
7. green

## Commas 17: Checking the Sentences

### Exercise 17

1. In example A, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**
2. In example A, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **no**
3. Therefore, does the example A sentence receive a rule #6 comma? **no**
4. In example B, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**
5. In example B, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**

6. Therefore, does the example B sentence receive a rule #6 comma? **yes**
7. In example C, is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**
8. In example C, is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **no**
9. Therefore, does the example C sentence receive a rule #6 comma? **no**

## Commas 18: Individual Conjunctions—For, Or, Nor

1. You couldn't decipher your homework, **for** it was soaked in the rain.
2. **[sample answer]** This might have all the appearances of madness, or this might be just coincidence.
3. Much that is known is **not** revealed to us, **nor are we** told fables of women that excelled of old.

## Commas 19: Individual Conjunctions—But, Yet, So

1. (a) Example A receives no comma. Why not? **The right-hand word group is not a sentence.**  
(b) Example B *can* receive a comma. Why? **The conjunction is “but.”**
2. For the “roller coaster” sentence, would you use the conjunction “but” or the conjunction “yet”? Why? **“Yet.” It's surprising that the riders would continue to fling their arms into the air.**
3.
  - The owners of the plantation let the bananas rot in the train cars **so that** the price of bananas will be driven upwards.
  - A complete trainload of bananas has rotted, **so** the price of bananas has gone up.

## Commas 20: Review of Comma Rule #6

### Exercise 20

1. A window to the east will serve as well as a window to the west, **for** the eastern sky echoes the western sky.
2. Four flaming angels crouched on the hood, **but (or) yet** the world did not collapse.
3. He might be insulting the sky, **or** he might only be letting go a bit of green molded plastic soldier tied to a parachute.
4. I am not Prince Hamlet, **nor** was I meant to be.
5. It is raining again this morning, **and** I am remembering that it rained then, too.
6. It's morning come again, **and** she begins to sing above the soup.
7. My dreams alone I remember, **for** I see them at night.
8. My wife wakes me with a shove **and** commences to try her sorry Deutsch with me.
9. Never from pure heaven have there fallen so many fires, **nor** have such menacing comets burned.
10. Nothing gave but the walls' sharp echo, **so** I swung again in anger.
11. She notices that he's made it halfway, **but (or) yet** she can't stop the cars rushing towards him.
12. Some days I stand here until I lose my focus **and** drift off out of the moment.
13. The chemist said it would be all right, **but (or) yet** I've never been the same.
14. The dial stirs, **but (or) yet** none perceive that it moves.
15. The wound she gives may not be healed, **so** I have fled over plains and hills for refuge from so dangerous a lady.
16. You should let me alone now, **or** I will show you the savage green sprouting through the obscene holes of your eyes.

## Commas 21: Review of Comma Rules 5 and 6

### Exercise 21

1. poor 5
2. frock 6
3. Heart 6
4. bleed 6
5. no comma
6. illusion 6
7. no comma
8. bored 5
9. at 6
10. passions 6
11. voice 6

## Commas 22: Multiple Comma Rules

### Exercise 22

1. 1, 3
2. 1, 4
3. 5, 3
4. 2, 3
5. 5, 6
6. 6, 3
7. 2, 4
8. 6, 2
9. 6, 4

## Commas Practice Test

1. sour 1; desperate 5
2. roses 3
3. disorder 6; grasp 3
4. pick 6
5. no comma
6. cold 5
7. gills 2; blood 2
8. load 1
9. run 1
10. Columbus 2; brains 2
11. flesh 4; bones 4; bones 4; entrails 4
12. seen 6
13. no comma
14. flying 3
15. no comma
16. mine 2; cleanings 2; work 4; bed 4
17. clouds 4; water 4

## Commas Final Test

1. darken 1; narrow 5
2. me 6
3. stout 5
4. dark 1
5. silo 3
6. foreboding 1; angry 6
7. firelight 2; walls 2
8. thin 5; river 3
9. shy 5
10. mechanism 2; together 2; time 4; patience 4
11. strip 4; town 4
12. Garbo 2; Paris 2
13. high 5
14. fear 6; them 3
15. music 3
16. excitement 1; pit 3
17. ambulance 2; artery 2; beacons 4; down 4
18. wild 6
19. no comma
20. mind 4; sneer 4; wicked 5
21. low 6; mussels 2; air 2
22. goose 1