# Understanding Commas

**By the end of this lesson you should be able to:**

1. Identify different ways to use the comma.
2. Apply these in your assignments where appropriate.

**Introduction:**

While full stops allow for long pauses in between sentences, commas allow for brief pauses within sentences. Commas have a variety of uses. These include:

1. Separating items that are listed in a sentence
2. Joining two independent clauses
3. Following conjunctive adverbs in a sentence
4. To separate an introductory phrase from the main sentence
5. To separate any extra information out of sentences
6. Used in sentences that contain quotations
7. Used to separate days, weeks, months and years when writing.

Although this may seem difficult to understand at the moment, as we go through the lesson plan the different uses of commas will become clearer to you. Ask as many questions as needed to understand the ways in which you can use commas to enhance your academic writing.

**LESSON PLAN**

The uses of the comma are as follows:

1. **Commas separate nouns/adjectives/verbs in lists where three or more nouns/adjectives/verbs appear**

Example:[[1]](#footnote-1) *Nisbet said that change was natural, directional, immanent, continuous and necessary.*

In the above example, Nisbet uses five adjectives to describe change. Therefore, each of these adjectives requires a comma, except the last (“necessary”).

Note that in a list, the last two items are always connected with “and”.

You do not have to place a comma before the “and”, although it is always quite correct to do so.

When you are listing single words, you can get away with no comma before “and” (as in the example above). But when you are listing phrases and things are getting a bit complicated, rather put in a comma before the “and” as well.

Example: *Moderate parties’ positions began to converge on what can be best characterised as a broad-based, multifaceted social contract: a concord among diverse peoples, across class lines, between political leaders and* ***followers, and among*** *the elements of an emerging civil society.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Here the list comprises of short phrases such as “a concord among diverse peoples” or “between political leaders and follower”. This makes the list more complicated than a simple list of words such as apples, oranges and bananas. Because each item on the list is made up of a number of words we put a comma before the “and”.

1. **Commas are used when you are joining two independent clauses together with any of the following conjunctions:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| and | or | But | So | for | nor | yet |

Example: *Many people support democracy, for they believe it betters one’s standard of living.*

In the above example, the comma comes before the conjunction “for”, which separates the independent clause “**Many people support democracy**” from the other, “**They believe it betters one’s standard of living**”.

1. **Commas follow some conjunctive adverbs that start a sentence[[3]](#footnote-3). The following are often found in academic writing:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| however | Therefore |
| consequently | Furthermore |
| nevertheless | in addition |
| as if | as long as |
| before | even if |
| if only | in order that |
| since | so that |
| though | till |
| when | wherever |
| where | while |
| as though | because |
| even though | if |
| now that | once |
| than | that |
| unless | until |
| whereas | whenever |
| after | although |

Example: *Therefore, Wallerstein’s idea of the core refers to those who earn high wages.*

In the above example, the comma comes directly after the conjunctive adverb “Therefore”.

1. **Commas are used to separate an introductory phrase or subordinate clause from the rest of the sentence.**

Example: *For nearly the entire decade of the 1980s, unemployment has risen steadily and average per capita private sector investment has dropped sharply.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

In the above example the comma separates the introductory phrase “For nearly the entire decade of the 1980s” from the rest of the sentence.

NB: it is not always necessary for a comma to be placed after the introductory statement; however, more often than not the comma will add to the flow and meaning of the sentence.

1. **Commas are used to separate any extra information from the sentence.**

Example: *Long Walk to Freedom, written by Nelson Mandela, provides an in-depth analysis of the negotiation process.*

In the above example, “Long Walk to Freedom provides an in-depth analysis of the negotiation process.” is the main sentence – it can stand on its own without any other information. Therefore, “written by Nelson Mandela” is the extra information that needs to be separated from the sentence by commas.

The commas here do the same job as putting the extra information in parentheses [brackets]. They show that it is additional information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

1. **Commas are used with quotations**

The correct place to position commas when writing quotations is before the last quotation mark.

Example 1: *“A ruling elite, then is a controlling group less than a majority in size that is not a pure artefact of democratic rules,” says Dahl.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

It can also be used to break up a quote in the middle of a sentence:

Example 2: *“One can always expect,” he said, “that the elite will act in their own interest.”*

1. **Commas separate days, months and years**

Example: *South Africa’s first democratic election commenced on Wedenesday, 27 April, 1994.*

If any part of the date is left out then commas are not required. For example, if we did not know that the date the elections took place, we would simply write the sentence as follows:

*South Africa’s first democratic election commenced in April 1994.*

**EXERCISES**

**Activity 1**

Apply your knowledge of the various uses of a comma by placing the comma in the correct position in each sentence:

1. However the armed struggle would continue.
2. Breaking the precedent they had set in their other 1990 meetings De Klerk and Mandela did not appear together to issue their statement.
3. The 1917 Bolshevik Russian Revolution led by Lenin advanced the Marxist theory of revolution.
4. Weber’s three types of legitimacy include traditional authority charismatic authority and legal-rational authority.
5. Legitimacy addresses not the question of why people should obey a state but the question of why they do obey the state.
6. “It appears to me” Edmund Burke wrote “as if I were in a great crisis not of the affairs of France alone but of all of Europe…”
7. For the successful management of class conflict through the institutions of the state class cleavages must be moderate.

**Common Comma Errors**

1. **Never use only one comma between a subject and its verb.**

Incorrect: *Since 1994 South Africa, has shifted away from the “Rainbow Nation” discourse.*

Notice that in the above example the comma separates “South Africa” (the subject) from “has shifted” (its verb).

Correct 1: *Since 1994 South Africa has shifted away from the “Rainbow Nation” discourse.*

Correct 2: *South Africa has, in the years since 1994, shifted away from the “Rainbow Nation” discourse.*

Incorrect: Can you believe that Thando, would do that?

Correct 1: Can you believe that Thando would do that?

OR

Correct 2: Can you believe that Thando, who is supposedly so nice, would do that?

1. **Avoid the comma splice error**

This occurs when a comma separates two independent clauses that should in fact be separated by a conjunction, semi-colon or full stop. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Incorrect: *The elite is simply a group of people who have the highest indices in their particular field of activity, it is important that this elite be divided into a governing and non-governing elite.*

Correct: *The elite is simply a group of people who have the highest indices in their particular field of activity. It is important that this elite be divided into a governing and non-governing elite.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Notice how in the above example that there are two independent clauses (“The elite is simply a group of people who have the highest indices in their particular field of activity” and “It is important that this elite be divided into a governing and non-governing elite) that can stand on their own and do not require a comma to separate them.

NB: Avoid the comma splice error by keeping your writing as concise as possible. Therefore, aim to write short sentences that do not need much punctuation.

1. **Avoid the run-on sentence error**

This error is like the comma splice error, except instead of putting a comma in the wrong position, two independent clauses stand next to each other in the same sentence without being separated by a punctuation mark.

Incorrect: *The first question deals with the nature of the political elite the second question deals with its maintenance or displacement.*

Correct: *The first question deals with the nature of the political elite while the second question deals with its maintenance or displacement.[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Notice in the above example how the conjunction “while” joins the two independent clauses to amend the run-on sentence error.

**Activity 2**

Rewrite the following sentences that contain any of the common comma errors mentioned above.

1. South Africa must go to extraordinary lengths to resolve class conflict, it must forge a new political system, and improve widespread deprivation.

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1. Both the NP and the ANC, had to come to political agreements for South Africa to progress towards democracy.

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1. South Africa will continue to be riveted by conflicts, it would be naïve to think otherwise.

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1. The United Nations is an inclusive organisation, it is open to virtually any state.

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1. Taken together, these assumptions, frame the dilemma on which I wish to focus.

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1. No one pretended that multilateralism constituted a new mode of governance, its scope was too partial and fragmentary for this.

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1. [This sentence was sourced from: Bill, J and Hardgrave, R. 1981. “The Political Elite Approach” in *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory*. (Washington, DC: University Press of America), pp.47.] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Sisk, T. 1995. *Democratisation in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp.13.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A conjunctive adverb, like all other conjunctions – connects different parts of a sentence to one another. It can connect two complete sentences or it can connect an independent clause with a phrase. For more information on this, see the *Conjunctions* lesson plan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Sisk, T. 1995. *Democratisation in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp.12.] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Bill, J and Hardgrave, R. 1981. “The Political Elite Approach” in *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory*. (Washington, DC: University Press of America), pp. 163.] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on these punctuation marks and their use, refer to the *Semi-Colons and Colons* lesson plan [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Bill, J and Hardgrave, R. 1981. “The Political Elite Approach” in *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory*. (Washington, DC: University Press of America), pp.151.] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [Bill, J and Hardgrave, R. 1981. “The Political Elite Approach” in *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory*. (Washington, DC: University Press of America), pp.149.] [↑](#footnote-ref-8)