



Commas with Parenthetical Phrases and Clauses, Coordinating Conjunctions, and Introductory Phrases

What is the difference between a phrase and a clause?

A **clause** has a subject and a verb. It can be a complete sentence or part of a complete sentence. If a clause forms a complete thought—that is, if it has a subject and a verb that may stand on their own as a complete sentence—it is called an independent clause. (Ex. It looked like it would rain.) If a clause has both a subject and a verb but forms an incomplete thought, it is called a dependent clause. (Ex. Because the clouds became very dark,). Here is a complete sentence made up of two clauses: Because the clouds became very dark, it looked like it would rain.

A **phrase** is a cluster of two or more words that do not form a complete thought. Usually phrases are either a subject with no verb or a verb with no subject—but not always. (Ex. While reaching for her umbrella,) (Ex. the purple one,) (Ex. Not yet.).

What is the difference between a dependent and an independent phrase or clause?

A **clause** has a subject and a verb and could be a complete sentence or is part of a complete sentence. An **independent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. Essentially, an independent clause is a sentence. A **dependent clause** is a part of a sentence that needs more information to be complete. It has a subject and a verb but it is not a complete sentence. Ex. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure spring break begins on the 15th. In this example, “but I'm pretty sure spring break begins on the 15th” is the dependent clause. It depends on the other part of the sentence (the independent clause “I could be wrong”) to make sense and be complete.

Commas with introductory phrases or words

Introductory phrases or words are dependent parts of a sentence that “set the stage” for the independent clause (complete idea or sentence) following it. Use commas to set off the introductions.

Ex. Before I went to college, I used to sleep until 9 a.m. Ex. In order to make it to the bus, we need to leave immediately. Ex. All in all, we wouldn’t do it any other way. Ex. After it had rained for three days straight, we decided to abort our camping trip. Ex. Whether you are right or wrong, I still love you. Ex. Mostly, the group gets along very well. Ex. Oddly, my keys are still missing.

Commas with parenthetical phrases or clauses

A parenthetical phrase or clause is like a side comment, a part of a sentence that adds information but is not essential for making the sentence complete. Parenthetical phrases or clauses are set off by commas. Ex. The play at Concordia University, where I am a student, was exceptionally funny. One could remove the phrase “where I am a student” and the sentence would be complete and the essential meaning would not be altered. If you can add the words “by the way” to the phrase or clause inserted into the essential part of the sentence, chances are it is parenthetical. Ex. My blue socks, which (by the way) need mending, are still in the laundry pile.

The classic example below demonstrates the difference between comma use with a restrictive (essential) clause or phrase and a nonrestrictive (parenthetical, non-essential) clause or phrase.

- The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage.
(Restrictive: Indicates more than one lawn mower)
- The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage.
(Nonrestrictive: Adds non-essential information about the only lawn mower)

Commas with coordinating conjunctions

A conjunction is the part of speech that connects words, phrases, or clauses. A coordinating conjunction connects two words, phrases, or clauses of equal importance or having the same grammatical structure within a sentence. There are six common coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. You can remember them by the mnemonic (memory aid) FANBOYS. Coordinating conjunctions are preceded by a comma when they connect two independent clauses!

Ex. I left early for once, *for* someone else cleaned up the kitchen. Ex. I am going to see you tomorrow, *and* I can hardly wait. Ex. The research did not support her hypothesis, *nor* did it include any reliable sources. Ex. I should really go, *but* I just can’t leave until this song is over. Ex. I should leave now, *or* I should leave first thing tomorrow morning. Ex. Professor Pritz is retiring, *yet* he said he will continue to teach now and again as an adjunct professor. Ex. My sister will take me to the airport, *so* you no longer need to fill up your gas tank.

Since each of the coordinating conjunctions in the examples links two independent clauses, they are preceded by a comma.