

## Comma Don'ts

Here are some of the major errors people make when placing commas:

- do not use a comma to separate a verb from its subject or object.
- don't use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series.
- don't use a comma after a coordinating conjunction, after such as or like, after although, or before than.
- If parentheses are situated within a sentence, punctuation comes after not before.

### Examples of incorrect usage

1. The bibliographer who found the rare edition, fought a sly bookseller for its purchase. {Here "bibliographer" is the subject and the relative clause "who found the rare edition" is restrictive – it is necessary and part of the subject. The comma, therefore, comes between the subject and its verb and is incorrect.}
2. The book, was in fine condition. {Again, the subject has been incorrectly separated from its verb.}
3. The book owner wanted, good money for the item. {Here the verb is separated from its direct object; no comma is necessary.}
4. No pages were, foxed, smudged, or written upon. {There should be no comma before the list that begins with "foxed" (foxing is oxidation of iron in some older paper that produces brown blotching).}
5. The delight of the scholar was complete, thorough, and convincing, in all ways. {Do not use the comma after "convincing," the end of the list.}
6. The roof of the library was leaking, and, in preparation for its repair, the physical plant workers began to chew gum. {The first comma is appropriate: it is separating two independent clauses joined by the coordinating conjunction, "and." The second comma, however, is not needed and should not be used. The sentence should read: "The roof of the library was leaking, and in preparation for its repair, the physical plant workers began to chew gum." Some light punctuators would even delete the final comma.}

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7. They thought this the best course of action although, it had never worked before. {If a comma is to be placed in this sentence, it would come before “although,” not after. Most writers will view the subordinate clause “although it had never worked before” as restrictive and would not place any comma at all.}

8. Having seen the weather forecast, (torrential rains were on the way), the director of the library bought a can of roofing tar. {Having one comma separate the introductory participial phrase from the rest of the sentence is appropriate. It should come after the final parenthesis, not before the first.}

### Sample Sentences

Describe why the following sentences are not correctly punctuated; then punctuate them appropriately.

1. The BASH which was held in the TRLC, started slowly and built with a quiet but funky rhythm.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:14 PM

**Comment [1]:** Depending on the emphasis chosen by the author, the relative clause “which was held in the TRLC” needs to be set apart with two commas or none, not one.

2. Children munched, pig cookies and sat close to their mothers.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:25 PM

**Comment [2]:** The comma is incorrectly separating the verb from its direct object. Only the final period is needed.

3. A group of tarts arranged in a Pacman design, was the highlight of the dessert table.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 12:55 PM

**Comment [3]:** Again, the subject is incorrectly separated from the verb by a comma. The intervening phrases are restrictive and need no punctuation.

4. After a series of misspellings on BASH fliers, a student named Bryan brought in, a small bowl of dirt labeled “desert.”

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:25 PM

**Comment [4]:** Nice sentence. The introductory phrasing (a triple prepositional phrase) is appropriately set apart from the main clause with a comma. Presuming that the name of the student is important, the participial phrase “named Bryan” is restrictive and thus correctly *non-punctuated*. The verb “brought” is followed by the adverb “in” and then the direct object “bowl.” No comma should intervene between the verb and this object.

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5. That simple visual cue meant more to the author, than the unthinking could possibly know.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:24 PM

**Comment [5]:** “Than” is a conjunction joining “the unthinking could possibly know” with the rest of the sentence. There is no plausible reason for setting apart this clause (except perhaps in some wildly rhetorical dimension). The comma before “than” is incorrect.

6. Some people are, unthinking, graceless, self-involved and boring.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:24 PM

**Comment [6]:** “Unthinking,” “graceless,” “self-involved,” and “boring” are adjectives in a list. Whether you place a comma after “self-involved” is a matter of choice. No comma, however, should come before the beginning of the list.

7. Other folk are less forward and more apt to think first of others, and, when an occasion demands authority, they have difficulty asserting themselves.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:23 PM

**Comment [7]:** The initial comma is well placed before “and,” a coordinating conjunction that ties together independent clauses. The comma following “and,” however, is unnecessary. Blend “and” with the following introductory clause “when an occasion demands authority, then set all apart with the comma after “authority.”

8. I understood the gist of his speech although, I never could agree with such sodden ideas.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:24 PM

**Comment [8]:** The comma after “although” is poorly placed. The real decision is whether to place a comma after “speech.” It’s a decision call.

9. They were debating several scenarios such as, heading to Tahoe, staying put in Pomona, or driving day and night straight north.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:27 PM

**Comment [9]:** This is a common error. No comma should follow “such as,” which in effect acts like a colon introducing a list. The phrase itself acts as punctuation.

10. Staying put in Pomona was the safest bet, but it also seemed like, the surest way to retire in obscurity.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 1:29 PM

**Comment [10]:** The first comma is well placed, but this second is not. A common error, this may be a holdover from overzealous rhetorical punctuation.