

Using Commas between Independent Clauses

When joining independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction — and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet — place a comma before the conjunction.

Examples

1. Kerry sat next to the tin of Luxury Wafers with Vanilla Crème filling, and he began to wonder about life before modern times.
2. He did not bewail the excesses of the twenty-first century, yet he knew that those excesses existed.
3. Life in South Jersey had not been difficult, but life in fifth-century Spain might not have been difficult either.

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Comment: It was the CVS brand of cookie.

Short independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions often drop the comma.

Examples

1. The boss shouted so the workers stopped.
2. They understood but he did not.
3. The donuts were gone and he got none.

Using commas to separate two or more independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions is one of the most “unbreakable” rules of modern punctuation. Nevertheless, light punctuation styles often neglect their use. Be aware that standard usage calls for a comma in these circumstances. If you decide to break this “rule” do so consciously and for appropriate stylistic reasons.

Examples

1. The dirt bikes that mom and dad bought for the cabin are expensive and I don't see any reason to leave them outside in the rain.
2. The car has been running great so you should not worry about a breakdown.

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Comment: In more formal, though not stiffly formal prose, commas would be placed before the coordinating conjunctions. Still, as written, both sentences are clear and effective.

Sample Sentences

Punctuate appropriately at the coordinating conjunction(s).

1. Christina walked to the dump at the back of her yard, and she looked about for her recently discarded dish strainer.

2. It had been slightly marred from an accidental hit and run, so she had decided to throw it away.

3. Later in the week, she had a sink full of dishes, but there was no strainer available for use.

4. She had to buy a new strainer or she had to retrieve the damaged one.

5. In the end she knew that it had been only slightly damaged, and she decided that she didn't mind a lightly distressed strainer.

6. She understood the lesson, and from that point on she promised herself to be more careful pulling out of the driveway.

The following sentences are incorrectly punctuated. In what way(s)?

7. Two or more wise men were sitting by the road for, they thought a car filled with acumen would soon pass by.

8. Presently a big red, four-door Ford passed, but the wise men, agreed that it was not the one.

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Comment: Judgment comes into play here. This sentence is short and punchy enough to do without punctuation. However, a comma before the coordinating conjunction would add a certain two-sided drama to the sentence. THIS, or THAT.

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Comment: The comma should come after "road" and before the coordinating conjunction "for."

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Comment: The first comma is okay, and so is the second, which separates the clauses. The third comma, after "men," is incorrect and should be deleted.

using commas between independent clauses

9. Seeking such portable wisdom, may seem eccentric, yet in ancient times insight was often transported through extraordinary means.

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Comment: The first comma is wrongly separating the subject from the verb and should be deleted. The second comma is fine.

10. In the end, the delivery was made on a bike, by an old man and a cat and both seemed unfazed by the surprise of the wise men.

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Comment: Here the first comma is acceptable, although light punctuators would not use it. The second comma is incorrect. A comma is needed after "cat" and before "and."