

Book 7

**Mastering English
Grammar**

COMMAS

David Moeller

COMMAS

Book 7 of the MASTERING ENGLISH GRAMMAR
Series

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Titles in the *Mastering English Grammar Series*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: *MASTERING ENGLISH GRAMMAR*

The nine titles in the *Mastering English Grammar* series can be subdivided into three books on the parts of speech, three on sentence structure, and three on punctuation:

Parts of Speech

- Book 1: *Nouns and Adjectives*
- Book 2: *Verbs and Adverbs*
- Book 3: *Pronouns, Prepositions, and Conjunctions*

Sentence Structure

- Book 4: *Subjects and Verbs*
- Book 5: *Compound Sentences*
- Book 6: *Complex Sentences*

Punctuation

- Book 7: *Commas*
- Book 8: *Semicolons and Colons*
- Book 9: *Parentheses, Brackets, Dashes, Ellipses, Italics, and Hyphens*

What sets this series apart from other grammar books is that instead of trying to include all that can be said on the topic of grammar (the data-dump approach), it focuses on those concepts that promise a higher return on investment (ROI). In other words, as much as possible, the books in this series aim to translate the study of grammar into more competent reading and writing.

The term *generative* refers to a study of grammar or rhetoric that helps us achieve in writing what we wouldn't have been able to achieve otherwise. Generative grammar is grammar at its most practical—it's grammar we can use. Such generative material has been sprinkled throughout the pages of the books in this series.

The nine books in this series constitute a writer's grammar. The *Mastering*

that appears in the series title is not a reference to earning high scores on grammar quizzes; instead, it refers to increasing our ability to understand the texts of others and to formulate words, phrases, and clauses while writing. Ultimately, we will want to use the knowledge we gain to *generate* more complex structures as we write.

All nine books in this series contain exercises (called *Your Turn*), a book-ending *Test Questions* section, and answers to all exercise and test questions.

Ultimately, the aim of each title is to equip you with some knowledge and some practical skills to add to your arsenal of writing strategies.

E-Book Vs. Print

Because the nine titles in the series contain exercises and test questions, a discussion of the difference between an e-book and a print book is really a discussion of writing out answers vs. working out answers in our heads. The e-books in this series are designed to accommodate the limitations of e-readers. For example, to reduce scrolling, answers follow immediately upon the heels of questions. When access to reference material—like word lists, for example—is necessary, that material will reappear in those places where it is needed.

Print versions, on the other hand, leave room for writing out answers or marking up text. And in the print versions, the answers are in the back of the book.

INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 7: *COMMAS*

Welcome to *Book 7: Commas*, a book that teaches how comma rules and stylish sentence structure go hand-in-hand.

In this book we study only those comma rules that relate to sentence construction. There are other uses of the comma that lie outside the scope of this e-book.

Our six comma rules:

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

To use any of these six comma rules, we first need to learn how to create sentences that call for the six comma rules listed above. For example, to apply rules 1-3, we need to understand what it means to add words, phrases, or clauses to base sentences. Because of this, much of what this e-book teaches about comma placement is really the teaching of sentence structure.

As we move beyond the foundational lessons of the e-book, our sentences grow even more sophisticated as we learn how to construct sentences that require multiple comma rules within the same sentence.

RULE 1: INTRODUCTORY

Lesson 1: Introductory Commas

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 (1) sentence.

This sentence pattern should be read in this way: First some added words, then an **introductory comma** (a Rule #1 comma), then a sentence. Note that instead of using commas, we are using comma rule numbers inside parentheses. The (1) represents *comma rule number 1*.

Start with a sentence:

- I am obsessed with funnel-shaped clouds

Then add a word(s), a phrase(s), or a clause(s):

- though I find peace in strawberry sunsets

Then place the added words to the left of the sentence; the Rule #1 comma separates the added words from the sentence:

- Though I find peace in strawberry sunsets, I am obsessed with funnel-shaped clouds.

Note: We are assuming that while composing sentences the mind first creates base sentences (subjects and verbs) and then creates other words and structures to tack on to those base sentences.

YOUR TURN 1

Note: This being an e-book, the Your Turn exercises are intended to be done mentally. Answers to the Your Turn exercises follow the exercises.

This is a (mental) composition exercise. You are given the added, introductory words and the Rule #1 comma. You create a sentence to follow the comma.

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,

POSSIBLE ANSWERS 1

Note that in the Answers section the rule number inside parentheses represents the introductory comma.

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

RULE 2: MEDIAL

Lesson 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

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.

The medial commas work much like parentheses: they show where the added medial words begin and where they end. When 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 (2) seeking after the man who created him (2) stumbled through the northern mists.

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

Note that the base sentence (the subject and predicate) cannot be removed from a sentence; the added words can be removed. Let's test this concept of *removability*.

In the Frankenstein's monster sentence above, 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?

Removing parts 1 or 3 leaves us with nonsense. But removing part 2 (the ADDED WORDS) leaves us with a perfectly good sentence: *Frankenstein's monster stumbled through the northern mists.*

Subject and predicates (or subjects and verbs) cannot be removed. The only removable word groups are those word groups we will be referring to as ADDED WORDS. The two medial Rule #2 commas show where those ADDED WORDS were added to the base sentence.

YOUR TURN 2

For each of the following, determine which words constitute the base sentence and which words constitute the ADDED WORDS. To do this, you will need to identify the word group that can be removed. These are the ADDED WORDS. The base sentence (subject and predicate) consists of all the non-removable 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.

ANSWERS 2

Here we are defining “base sentence” as the complete subject and complete predicate.

1. The Baron’s laboratory **(2)** ~~which is built in the tower of a castle~~ **(2)** has all the equipment necessary for creating life.

base sentence: The Baron’s laboratory has all the equipment necessary for creating life.

added words: which is built in the tower of a castle

2. The brothers and sisters **(2)** ~~leaving their histories at the door~~ **(2)** enter the dream house.

base sentence: The brothers and sisters enter the dream house.

added words: leaving their histories at the door

3. The man with the ice-cream cart **(2)** ~~working his little row of silver bells~~ **(2)** stops opposite my window.

base sentence: The man with the ice-cream cart stops opposite my window.

added words: working his little row of silver bells

4. The dazed starling **(2)** ~~which had been trapped within the room~~ **(2)** at last found the opened window.

base sentence: The dazed starling at last found the opened window.

added words: which had been trapped within the room

RULE 3: INTRODUCTORY

Lesson 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 (1) sentence
- **terminal comma:** sentence (3) ADDED WORDS

Examples:

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

YOUR TURN 3

In each of the following sentences, parentheses appear where a comma would be. You must decide whether that comma is a Rule 1 comma or a Rule 3 comma. ADDED WORDS to the left and complete (base) sentence to the right? It's Rule 1. ADDED WORDS to the right and complete (base) sentence to the left? It's Rule 3.

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.
5. The pear tree grew in the garden () bearing much less fruit this year than the year before.

ANSWERS 3

If the complete sentence is to the right, the removable words (shown by being crossed out) are to the left: Rule 1. If the complete sentence is to the left, the removable words are to the right: Rule 3.

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

Lesson 4: The Long Prepositional Phrase

When a prepositional phrase is in the introductory position, we use commas to set off **longer prepositional phrases** but not shorter phrases. Of course, 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*)

According to our *five words* rule, this sentence needs no comma:

- **Across the sky** the geese fanned out like a capital letter.

This sentence, which begins with a six-word double prepositional phrase, would get a comma:

- **In the contrails across the sky (1)** 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.

YOUR TURN 4

Three of the following five sentences need an introductory comma. Decide which sentences those are.

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

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

ANSWERS 4

1. ON a length of nylon fishline **(1)** the gull strangles.
2. IN this garden the daisies point their leaves in all directions.
3. FROM the kitchen table we saw the owl circling the kitchen table.
4. INTO the freshest deep spiraling grass **(1)** the puppies dive nose first.
5. ALONG the road TO death's open door **(1)** we march like prisoners who are forced into their day's labor. [*a double prepositional phrase*]

Lesson 5: Added Words—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. These **added words** can be **words**, **phrases**, or **clauses**.

Words refers to single words. Some examples:

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

Phrases refers to word groups like prepositional phrases, participial phrases, appositive phrases, and absolute phrases.

Some examples:

- Limited by light (1) the farthest note trails off into oblivion.
- The Loners (2) the men who worked the second shift (2) toiled silently at their thankless labor.
- You hoped to make your way back home once again (3) 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 (1) the small creatures maintain their assurance.
- My neighbor (2) who has just rocked his car out of the treacherous ice (2) looks at me and smiles.
- We learned the turbulence of water (3) which had been filling the reflecting pools since morning.

YOUR TURN 5

Added words can be added words, phrases, or clauses. The nine example sentences from Lesson 5 above give us examples of what it looks like to add words, to add phrases, and to add clauses. But there is still more to learn about these examples.

This Your Turn will lead us through a deeper study of the sentences from above.

- Today (1) I thought I was growing wings.
 - The apple of knowledge (2) Denise (2) should not be confused with plain bread.
 - The mother's eyes survey the fruits of her labor (3) casually.
1. Choose one of the bulleted sentences from above. Move the ADDED WORD from the introductory to the terminal position.
 2. Choose a different sentence from above and move the ADDED WORD from the terminal to the introductory position.
- Limited by light (1) the farthest note trails off into oblivion.
 - The Loners (2) the men who worked the second shift (2) toiled silently at their thankless labor.
 - You hoped to make your way back home once again (3) that ancient kiss still burning on your lips.
3. One of the three underlined phrases from the bulleted sentences above is an absolute phrase. We can convert this phrase to a complete sentence simply by adding the verb *was*. Which phrase is the absolute phrase?
 4. One of the three underlined phrases from the bulleted sentences above is an appositive phrase. An appositive renames a noun. Which phrase is the appositive phrase and which noun is the appositive renaming?
 5. The remaining phrase is a participial phrase. These phrases begin with participles, which are usually *-ing* or *-ed* words. Which phrase is the participial phrase?
- Though the cold may freeze them (1) the small creatures maintain their

assurance.

- My neighbor **(2)** who has just rocked his car out of the treacherous ice **(2)** looks at me and smiles.
 - We learned the turbulence of water **(3)** which had been filling the reflecting pools since morning.
5. Two of the underlined word groups from the bulleted sentences above are relative clauses. In most cases, relative clauses describe people or things. Those relative clauses that describe people begin with what word? Those relative clauses that describe things begin with what word?
 7. The other clause is an adverbial clause. These clauses can usually be flip-flopped. Move (mentally) the adverb clause from the introductory position to the terminal position and read your result.

ANSWERS 5

1. I thought I was growing wings today. [*the comma is no longer needed*]
2. Casually, the mother's eyes survey the fruits of her labor.
3. The absolute phrase is *that ancient kiss still burning on your lips* [adding "was" creates a sentence: "*That ancient kiss was still burning on your lips.*"]
4. The appositive phrase *the men who worked the second shift* is renaming the Loners.
5. The participial phrase is *limited by light*.
6. *who* for people; *which* for things
7. The small creatures maintain their assurance though the cold may freeze them.

Lesson 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. which phrases and clauses receive commas.

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

In the following examples, the participial phrase *tripping on the hems of their gowns* describes the *handmaidens*. The phrase performs the same descriptive work regardless of where in the sentence it appears.

- **in the introductory position:** TRIPPING ON THE HEMS OF THEIR GOWNS (1) the handmaidens turn the corner too quickly.
- **in the medial position:** The handmaidens (2) TRIPPING ON THE HEMS OF THEIR GOWNS (2) turn the corner too quickly.
- **in the terminal position:** The handmaidens turn the corner too quickly (3) TRIPPING ON THE HEMS OF THEIR GOWNS.

Appositives rename nouns. Appositives are more commonly placed in the medial and terminal positions, where they rename nouns to the left. They less commonly appear in the introductory position, where they rename nouns to the right.

In the two examples that follow, the appositive *the queen of the water* renames *the goddess*.

- **in the introductory position:** The queen of the water (1) THE GODDESS assumes her trident. [*less common configuration*]
- **in the medial position:** THE GODDESS (2) the queen of the water (2) assumes her trident.

Unlike the participial phrases above, appositives are not free to move about

the sentence. Therefore, for an example of an appositive in the terminal position, we must devise an appositive that renames *trident*:

- **in the terminal position:** The goddess assumes her TRIDENT (3) the symbol of her royalty.

Relative clauses beginning with *who* and *which* follow the nouns they describe; thus they can appear in medial and terminal positions only. *Which* clauses get commas; *who* clauses may appear with or without commas.

Examples:

- **in the medial position:** Our true nature (2) WHICH is stained by labor (2) preens its feathers.
- **in the terminal position:** They coveted the honey of Sappho (3) WHO would not denounce her vices.

Adverbial subordinate 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 (1) you feed the children sweet rolls and melon.
- You feed the children sweet rolls and melon () AFTER you drive them to the zoo. [*no comma*]

Note: In this lesson we've taken a quick look at some are some of the phrases and clauses that commonly require commas. There are others, but because the focus of these lessons is commas rather than phrases and clauses, the listing above will serve us just fine.

YOUR TURN 6

This Your Turn consists of five sets of sentences and questions. To answer the questions, you will need to draw upon your understanding of phrases, clauses, and comma placement.

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 sentence for number 1 above, 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.*

Here, 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 an adverbial subordinate clause, yet needs no comma. How could this sentence be rewritten so that it does need a comma?

ANSWERS 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 **era** or the word **scullery**.

2. In the sentence for number 1 above, if the participial phrase were moved from the introductory to the medial position, the number of commas would change from **1** to **2**.
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 **introductory** position, but it cannot be moved to the **terminal** 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? **Relative clauses follow the nouns they describe. In this case, the clause describes the forty-year-old man and must stay where it is.**

5. *A face blooms in the washroom mirror as you grope for the light switch.*

This sentence contains an adverbial subordinate clause, yet needs no comma. How could this sentence be rewritten so that it does need a comma? **We could flip-flop the sentence, moving the adverbial subordinate clause to the left:**

- as you grope for the light switch (1) a face blooms in the washroom mirror.

Lesson 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.

The sentence below contains one phrase or clause in each of the three sentence slots. Note that the base sentence (the subject and predicate) is underlined:

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

The elements of the sentence above are as follows:

- **base sentence:** the torn poster is beginning to reveal the once-hidden bricks
- **prepositional phrase in the introductory position:** ABOVE the patiently waiting mules
- **participial phrase in the medial position:** CRUMPLED from top to bottom
- **relative clause in the terminal position:** WHICH ooze red color down to the rain-swept pavement

In this sentence, three different word groups have been added to a single sentence, requiring commas from each of the three rule groups we have learned.

YOUR TURN 7

For each of the following:

- decide where to place commas and
- name the rule number for each.

The number in brackets is the number of commas needed.

1. If my wooden vessel sinks it may well be in answer to my undying adversary the waves that keep me from reaching you. [2]
2. Deciding against the chocolate malted Giuletta Masina the wife of Federico Fellini puts her poodle in a cab. [3]
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. [2]
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. [4]
5. The last trainees reluctantly moving one step higher climb the diving tower trembling on the wet rungs. [3]

ANSWERS 7

1. IF my wooden vessel sinks (1) it may well be in answer to my undying adversary (3) the waves that keep me from reaching you. [*introductory adverbial subordinate clause; terminal appositive*]
2. DECIDING against the chocolate malted (1) Giulietta Masina (2) the wife of Federico Fellini (2) puts her poodle in a cab. [*introductory participial phrase; medial appositive*]
3. WHEN he didn't pick the rider as carefully as the horse (1) we were all cheated of some marvelous experience (3) WHICH left us with no story to tell. [*introductory adverbial subordinate clause; terminal relative clause*]
4. IN the mirrored light OF the school gym (1) the best slow dancer (2) STANDING on her tip-toes (2) dances within the confines of your arms (3) PRETENDING not to hear you count time to the music. [*introductory long prepositional phrase; medial participial phrase; terminal participial phrase*]
5. The last trainees (2) reluctantly MOVING one step higher (2) climb the diving tower (3) TREMBLING on the wet rungs. [*medial participial phrase; terminal participial phrase*]

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

For each of the following:

- decide where to place commas and
- name the rule number for each.

The number in brackets is the number of commas needed.

YOUR TURN 8

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

ANSWERS 8

1. HOLDING her thin arms out from her sides (1) she begins to dance. [*introductory participial phrase*]
2. The others follow (3) SHAKING their fingers. [*terminal participial phrase*]
3. ON the sheen OF the still lake (1) the floating loon sleeps. [*introductory long prepositional phrase*]
4. The campers (2) FACING the southerly firebow of the sun (2) gather their fire's fuel (3) the dead branches that have fallen from the sky. [*medial participial phrase; terminal appositive*]
5. UNDER the high shade OF fir trees (1) they walked beside the stream (3) WADING through the ferns and the leaves. [*introductory long prepositional phrase; terminal participial phrase*]
5. HURRYING to find the larger sea (1) the creek (2) WHICH now seemed younger (2) gave promises of winter. [*introductory participial phrase; medial relative clause*]
7. Half-FROZEN (1) they knelt at the mouth of the creek (3) WATCHING the water spill over the silent stones. [*introductory participle; terminal participial phrase*]
3. Here is despair (3) a painful sense of isolation. [*terminal appositive*]
9. DESTROYED by madness (1) the best minds of the generation (2) WHO sat up in the supernatural darkness (2) dragged themselves through the streets at dawn. [*introductory participial phrase; medial relative clause*]
10. ON a busted rusty iron pole (1) Jack Kerouac (2) my companion (2) sat beside me (3) SURROUNDED by the steel roots of trees. [*introductory long prepositional phrase; medial appositive; terminal participial phrase*]
11. I admired the perfect beauty of the sunflower (3) the sweet natural eye to the new hip moon. [*terminal appositive*]
12. Sad (1) I take the elevator and go down (3) STANDING lost in calm thought. [*introductory adjective; terminal participial phrase*]

RULE 4: ITEMS IN A SERIES

Lesson 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 method** for items in a series:

- item A, item B, and item C

Or with our rule number in place of the commas:

- item A (4) item B (4) and item C

Some style guides avoid the comma before the conjunction, but in academic writing, we keep it. It's called the **series comma** (or Oxford comma), and in the series below, it's marked with an underline:

- item A (4) item B (4) and item C

Here's an example of standard items in a series:

- She had a slight accent (4) long black hair (4) and two frozen eyes.

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

She had . . .

- **item 1:** a slight accent (4)
- **item 2:** long black hair (4) and
- **item 3:** two frozen eyes.

The key to isolating the elements is to see where the lead in words end and the first item in the list begins. In *she had a slight accent, long black hair, and two frozen eyes*, the first item in the list begins after the word *had*.

Parallel Structure

The rule of parallel structure (or *parallelism*) says that when items are arranged in a series, each item must be in the same grammatical form as the other items in the series. In the example above, all three items are noun phrases. Put more simply, we have *a thing, a thing, and a thing*.

You'll be given a couple more examples of parallel structure when you reach the Answers section following the Your Turn.

YOUR TURN 9

In each of the following, decide where Rule #4 commas should be placed. In addition, identify each separate item in the series.

Example:

- The leafy tendrils lifted the grasses **(4)** the floating Nebulous **(4)** and the arms of the trees.
- **item 1:** the grasses
- **item 2:** the floating Nebulous
- **item 3:** the arms of the trees

1. The solid scholars get the degrees the jobs and the dollars.
2. You gathered your strength caught your breath and cried with your full lung power.
3. My father was a demon of frustrated dreams a breaker of trust and a poor thin boy with bad luck.
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.

ANSWERS 9

1. The solid scholars get the degrees **(4)** the jobs **(4)** and the dollars.

- **item 1:** the degrees
- **item 2:** the jobs
- **item 3:** the dollars

Note the close parallel structure in the three items above. Each item consists of the article *the* followed by a noun: *the noun, the noun, the noun*.

2. You gathered your strength **(4)** caught your breath **(4)** and cried with your full lung power.

- **item 1:** gathered your strength
- **item 2:** caught your breath
- **item 3:** cried with your full lung power

Note the close parallel structure in the three items above. Each item consists of a verb phrase: *gathered . . . , caught . . . , cried . . .*

3. My father was a demon of frustrated dreams **(4)** a breaker of trust **(4)** and a poor thin boy with bad luck.

- **item 1:** a demon of frustrated dreams
- **item 2:** a breaker of trust
- **item 3:** a poor thin boy with bad luck [*three noun phrases*]

4. I sort through piles of old canceled checks **(4)** old clippings **(4)** and yellow note cards that meant something once.

- **item 1:** old canceled checks
- **item 2:** old clippings
- **item 3:** yellow note cards that meant something once [*three noun phrases*]

5. It always turned out funny **(4)** weird **(4)** and helpful.

- **item 1:** funny
- **item 2:** weird
- **item 3:** helpful [*three adjectives*]

Lesson 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.

Two ways we can increase the complexity of our series:

1. **size:** by increasing the word-count of the items in the series
2. **number:** by increasing the number of items in the series.

With items in a series, 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 (4) a hopelessness about your work (4) and the realization that you will have to throw out everything you've done so far and start from scratch.

The series above consists of three noun phrases. Note that the third noun phrase (underlined) is longer than item 1 and item 2.

- **number (more than three items):** He went into a restaurant (4) took a menu to study (4) pocketed half a dozen cubes of sugar (4) drank cold good water (4) ate a roll (4) found the menu flat and unprofitable (4) and left between the busboy and the waiter.

This series contains seven verb phrases.

YOUR TURN 10

In numbers 1 – 3 of this Your Turn, you will practice creating longer items to add to the items you are given. For each, create a third item that meets the designated word count and is parallel in structure to the other two items in the series.

1. He described then how he backed his truck up to the edge of the pit **(4)** set the chains to the axle **(4)** and [*add a third item of 5 or more words*].
2. Write about the women's curlers with the bristles inside **(4)** your cousin's perfect Brownie uniforms **(4)** 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 **(4)** swim like a fish down to the bottom **(4)** and [*add a third item of 9 or more words*].

For numbers 4 – 6 you will practice creating series that contain more than three items.

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

POSSIBLE ANSWERS 10

1. He described then how he backed his truck up to the edge of the pit (4) set the chains to the axle (4) and ***threw the stick down into first gear.***
2. Write about the women's curlers with the bristles inside (4) your cousin's perfect Brownie uniforms (4) and ***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 (4) swim like a fish down to the bottom (4) and ***explore the bottom for pearls or coral or shells.***
4. We found them among dishes (4) dolls (4) lost shoes (4) and ***piles of junk mail and unpaid bills.***
5. A code bologna sandwich meant one or two slices of bologna (4) mustard (4) one wilted piece of iceberg lettuce (4) ***a thin slice of a yellow onion (4) and some unevenly spread dill relish.***
5. So I become a dog with a chew toy (4) worrying it for a while (4) wrestling it to the ground (4) flinging it over my shoulder (4) ***setting it on my paws (4) drooling some slobber on it (4) and flinging it across the room where it gets lost behind the armoire.***

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

In Lesson 11, the Your Turn exercises are split into three mini-sections; possible answers for all three mini-sections appear at the end of the lesson.

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 (4) bored (4) **or** afraid?
- In thirty years I expect to be older (4) less confident (4) **but** out of debt.

YOUR TURN 11

In the two sentences below, add conjunctions and third items according to the instructions.

1. As gifts, we might be given visions of rainy crowds in glistening cities **(4)** of sunlight crossing the loud corners **(4)** [*add the conjunction **or** and a third item of at least six words*].
2. After the thud on the window pane **(4)** we found the bird stunned **(4)** motionless **(4)** [*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. **Repetition of key words** is a stylish device that emphasizes the parallel nature of the items in the series.

For example:

- **without repeated words:** *They try to make you feel shameful because you won't do what they want (4) see them more often (4) or try to become successful.*

This same sentence can be rewritten so that the key word *won't* begins each of the three items:

- **with repeated words:** *They try to make you feel shameful because you won't do what they want (4) won't be more successful (4) and won't see them more often.*

Another example:

- **without repeated words:** *Writing can help you soften (4) wake you up (4) 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:

- **with repeated words:** *Writing can help you soften (4) can wake you up (4) and can get you to start paying attention.*

YOUR TURN (continued)

In the two sentences below, repeat words according to the instructions.

3. They are what our friends tell us in their pain **(4)** joy **(4)** rage **(4)** and cry against injustice. [*Revise this sentence so that the word **their** is repeated in items two, three, and four.*]
4. Now there are no conventions **(4)** donors **(4)** hats in the ring **(4)** and promises we always knew were never meant to be kept. [*Revise this sentence so that the word **no** is repeated 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 example of **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 **(4)** sentence **(4)** and sentence.

Example:

- **sentences in a series:** *Upstairs the floors sometimes tremble **(4)** the clothes go damp in the closets **(4)** and the whole place threatens to come down.*

YOUR TURN (continued)

In the two sentences below, add a third short sentence to create sentences in a series.

5. Horses dance in the warm rain **(4)** pheasants croak on the meadows **(4)** and [*add a third-item short sentence*].
5. There was rain **(4)** the rivers rose **(4)** and [*add a third-item short sentence*].

POSSIBLE ANSWERS 11

1. As gifts (4) we might be given visions of rainy crowds in glistening cities (4) of sunlight crossing the loud corners (4) **or of white clouds ascending to the heavens above.**
2. After the thud on the window pane (4) we found the bird stunned (4) motionless (4) **but still capable of planning his escape.**
3. They are what our friends tell us in their pain (4) **their** joy (4) **their** rage (4) and **their** cry against injustice.
4. Now there are no conventions (4) **no** donors (4) **no** hats in the ring (4) and **no** promises we always knew were never meant to be kept.
5. Horses dance in the warm rain (4) pheasants croak on the meadows (4) and **frogs cavort in the meadow.**
5. There was rain (4) the rivers rose (4) and **the sky darkened.**

Lesson 12: Polysyndeton and Asyndeton

In the three previous lessons, we have been using the standard 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 **(4)** item 2 **(4)** item 3

At first, we might find ourselves resisting the idea of asyndeton, thinking perhaps that dropping the conjunction before the final item is not permissible—that is, until we start looking for asyndeton in our reading. Though we may be uncomfortable with asyndeton at first, we are likely to discover that we've encountered it hundreds of times before.

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 **(4)** long black hair **(4)** 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 swapping *and* and a comma in many situations. Take this sentence for example:

- The wolf gobbles up the grandmother **and** dresses in her pajamas.

The sentence above uses *and* to join a compound verb. A comma, too, can do this joining work:

- The wolf gobbles up the grandmother **(,)** dresses in her pajamas.

YOUR TURN 12

Part 1

Revise each of the following sentences so that the items in the series are in the polysyndeton pattern rather than the standard pattern.

1. The solid scholars get the degrees (4) the jobs (4) and the dollars.
2. You backed away (4) caught your breath (4) and cried with your full lung power.
3. Good-bye to Flattery's fawning face (4) to Grandeur with his wise grimace (4) to upstart Wealth's averted eye (4) to crowded halls (4) to court and street (4) to frozen hearts (4) and to hastening feet.

Part 2

This time, revise each of the following sentences so that the items in the series are in the asyndeton pattern rather than the standard pattern.

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

ANSWERS 12

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.

For the following, we simply remove the "and" before the final item.

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

Lesson 13: Review of Comma Rules 1-4

Let's stop here and review the four comma rules we've learned so far:

1. introductory
2. medial
3. terminal
4. items in a series

YOUR TURN 13

Part 1

Here in part 1 we will review comma Rule #4 only. Decide where commas should be placed in the following sentences. Remember that with polysyndeton no commas will be needed.

1. She had a slight accent long black hair and two frozen eyes.
2. I haven't read one book memorized one plot or found a mind that did not doubt.
3. 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.
4. 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 the Waco countryside.
5. You can still discover new treasures under all those piles clean things up edit things out fix things get a grip.

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. Once again, no commas are necessary with the polysyndeton construction.

5. When pear and cherry bloom go down in showers the early petal-fall is past.
7. Lining the corridors in silent chairs they gaze at the broken television.
3. She lifts each page slightly at the corner readying herself to turn it.
9. The basket reappeared stuffed with apples.
10. 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.
11. Her vision in the woods a woman with a doe's ears accompanied her last breaths like a song of dying.

12. The wandering child who is past being tired tramples through the waist-deep grasses.
13. Their cares are small gray infinite.
14. Under the locked and darkened grille the animals are crying.
15. She didn't mind the squalor of axles oily pans caked-on grease and incessant flies.

ANSWERS 13

1. She had a slight accent (4) long black hair (4) and two frozen eyes.
2. I haven't read one book (4) memorized one plot (4) or found a mind that did not doubt.
3. 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. [*polysyndeton—no commas*]
4. If only there had been one saffron Buddhist to teach us how to sit still (4) just one Tibetan lama (4) just one Taoist (4) just one Zen (4) just one Thomas Merton Trappist (4) just one saint in the wilderness of the Waco countryside. [*asyndeton*]
5. You can still discover new treasures under all those piles (4) clean things up (4) edit things out (4) fix things (4) get a grip. [*asyndeton*]

Part 2

5. When pear and cherry bloom go down in showers (1) the early petal-fall is past.
7. Lining the corridors in silent chairs (1) they gaze at the broken television.
3. She lifts each page slightly at the corner (3) readying herself to turn it.
9. The basket reappeared (3) stuffed with apples.
10. 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. [*polysyndeton—no commas*]
11. Her vision in the woods (2) a woman with a doe's ears (2) accompanied her last breaths like a song of dying.
12. The wandering child (2) who is past being tired (2) tramples through the waist-deep grasses.
13. Their cares are small (4) gray (4) infinite. [*asyndeton*]
14. Under the locked and darkened grille (1) the animals are crying.
15. She didn't mind the squalor of axles (4) oily pans (4) caked-on grease (4) and incessant flies.

RULE 5: TWO ADJECTIVES

Lesson 14: Two Adjectives

Comma Rule #5 states that 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.

In the following example, the two adjectives are boldfaced and the noun is underlined.

- Welcome to the **silly (5) 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.

We use the Rule #5 comma whenever we produce three words in this sequence: **adjective (5) 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 (**here**) adjective (**but not here**) noun.

Here are two more examples:

- The **fierce (5) cold** air rushed in to fill them out like bushes thick with leaves.
- Thoreau lifted out two hands full of **wriggling (5) 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.

YOUR TURN 14

For each of the following, answer the questions that accompany each sentence.

1. We surprised one day a proud spotted pigeon. [*A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? What noun is being described by the two adjectives?*]
2. The ice had magnified the thickened radiant veins of the forewings. [*A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? What noun is being described by the two adjectives?*]
3. The sea and sky mobilized their fluid exquisite currents. [*A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? What noun is being described by the two adjectives?*]
4. The voice of a child emerged from the tall bearded man. [*A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? What noun is being described by the two adjectives?*]

ANSWERS 14

1. We surprised one day a **proud (5) spotted** pigeon.

A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? **proud** and **spotted**

What noun is being described by the two adjectives? pigeon

2. The ice had magnified the **thickened (5) radiant** veins of the forewings.

A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? **thickened** and **radiant**

What noun is being described by the two adjectives? veins

3. The sea and sky mobilized their **fluid (5) exquisite** currents.

A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? **fluid** and **exquisite**

What noun is being described by the two adjectives? currents

4. The voice of a child emerged from the **tall (5) bearded** man.

A Rule #5 comma should be placed between what two adjectives? **tall** and **bearded**

What noun is being described by the two adjectives? man

Lesson 15: Commas and *And*

The Rule #5 comma is **interchangeable** with the conjunction *and*. Wherever we can write *adjective comma adjective noun*, we can write *adjective and adjective noun*—and vice versa.

Here is an example:

- The **unpainted and plain** boards held the barn upright.
- The **unpainted (5) plain** boards held the barn upright.

Between the two adjectives *unpainted* and *plain*, we can use the conjunction *and* or a Rule #5 comma.

- Scatter the **good-natured and untidy** flowers upon the graves.
- Scatter the **good-natured (5) untidy** flowers upon the graves.

Between the two adjectives *good-natured* and *untidy*, we can use the conjunction *and* or a Rule #5 comma.

The two are interchangeable. We can call this interchangeability the *and* test. There are situations in which we have two adjectives to the left of a noun, yet no comma is used. The *and* test can help us determine when this is the case.

Consider these two examples:

- unpainted (5) plain boards
- six plain boards

The first example receives a comma while the second example does not. Why not?

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*.

Another way to explain this is by bracketing the words that belong together:

- six [plain boards]

Because the two words *plain boards* are treated as if they are fused together, naming a single object, the *and* test tells us not to place a comma between *six*

and *plain*. If the word *and* would not fit there, neither would a comma.

YOUR TURN 15

The first step in the following sentences is to identify the three-word *adjective adjective noun* portion of the sentence. Step two is to conduct the *and* test. If the word *and* sounds good between the two adjectives, then a Rule #5 comma can be placed there. If not, then no comma.

1. *He realized that no one should lie forever with such a huge lifeless thing.*

Which three words in the sentence give us an *adjective adjective noun* sequence?

Do the two adjectives pass the *and* test?

Then a comma [does or does not] belong between the two adjectives.

2. *Staring down at us was a strange fluttering bird.*

Which three words in the sentence give us an *adjective adjective noun* sequence?

Do the two adjectives pass the *and* test?

Then a comma [does or does not] belong between the two adjectives.

3. *Their brittle hind legs bent as if to jump.*

Which three words in the sentence give us an *adjective adjective noun* sequence?

Do the two adjectives pass the *and* test?

Then a comma [does or does not] belong between the two adjectives.

4. *Yet the trim feisty moth has not a drop of self-pity.*

Which three words in the sentence give us an *adjective adjective noun* sequence?

Do the two adjectives pass the *and* test?

Then a comma [does or does not] belong between the two adjectives.

ANSWERS 15

1. *He realized that no one should lie forever with such a **huge lifeless thing**.*

the three words: *huge lifeless thing*

pass the *and* test: yes—*huge and lifeless thing* sounds just fine

gets a Rule #5 comma: yes

2. *Staring down at us was a **strange fluttering bird**.*

the three words: *strange fluttering bird*

pass the *and* test: yes—*strange and fluttering bird* sounds just fine

gets a Rule #5 comma: yes

3. *Their **brittle [hind legs]** bent as if to jump.*

the three words: *brittle hind legs*

pass the *and* test: no—we would not say *brittle and hind legs*—the two words *hind legs* work together as one

gets a Rule #5 comma: no

4. *Yet the **trim feisty moth** has not a drop of self-pity.*

the three words: *trim feisty moth*

pass the *and* test: yes—*trim and feisty moth* sounds just fine

gets a Rule #5 comma: yes

RULE 6: COMPOUND SENTENCES

Lesson 16: Compound Sentences

Here is the pattern for comma Rule #6:

- Sentence **(6)** coordinating conjunction sentence.

A sentence that follows the pattern described above is a **compound sentence**. Note that we could refer to the two *sentence* portions of the pattern above as *independent clauses*. But because our focus here is on the comma more than on the underlying grammar of the word groups, we'll do fine calling these word groups *sentences*.

Example:

- The west lights fade **(6)** and stars come out in heaven.

When applying Rule #6 commas, we want to isolate the following four parts:

- **sentence:** *the west lights fade*
- **comma:** (6)
- **coordinating conjunction:** *and*
- **sentence:** *stars come out from heaven*

Assuming we already know what a sentence is, the only other information we need is to know which words are **coordinating conjunctions**.

Here are the seven coordinating conjunctions. The mnemonic device FANBOYS can help us to memorize them:

- *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*

YOUR TURN 16

For each of the following sentences, decide where Rule #6 commas should be placed. This Your Turn should be an easy one: in all seven sentences, the comma belongs to the left of one of the coordinating conjunctions listed below:

• *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*

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.
5. 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.

ANSWERS 16

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

Lesson 17: Checking the Sentences

We have seen that comma Rule #6 sentences (compound 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 the words to the left or to the right of the comma + conjunction are less than a complete sentence, don't use a comma.

It's not a compound sentence.

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*. To understand the *no* answer, we need to look once again at the example 2 sentence:

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

In this sentence, the bracketed right-hand word group is less than a complete sentence, which means that the entire word group is less than a complete

sentence, which means that we do not place a comma in front of the conjunction.

YOUR TURN 17

Answer the questions that accompany the three sentences below. If answered correctly, the questions will lead you to determine that only one of the three sentences is a compound sentence—the only one that should receive a Rule #6 comma.

Remember, if either of the first two answers are *no*, the third answer will be *no*.

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

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma?

2. *No honor is given to the plow and the fields have gone to ruin.*

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma?

3. *The rule applies to the jack of all hearts and especially to the queen of baguettes.*

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence?

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence?

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma?

ANSWERS 17

1. [*I gather a froth on my gums*] **and** [*grin the way an old woman grimaces in a morning mirror*].

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **no**

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma? **no**

2. [*No honor is given to the plow*] **(6) and** [*the fields have gone to ruin*].

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma? **yes**

3. [*The rule applies to the jack of all hearts*] **and (6)** [*especially to the queen of baguettes*].

Is the left-hand word group a complete sentence? **yes**

Is the right-hand word group a complete sentence? **no**

Therefore, does the sentence above receive a Rule #6 comma? **no**

In summary, neither *grin the way an old woman grimaces in the morning mirror* nor *especially to the queen of baguettes* is a complete sentence.

Lesson 18: Individual Conjunctions—*For, Or, Nor*

In Lesson 18, the Your Turn exercises are split into three mini-sections; the answers for all three mini-sections appear at the end of the lesson.

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.

As you write, remember that any sentence pair joined by *because* could just as easily be joined by a Rule #6 comma + *for*.

YOUR TURN 18

1. *You couldn't decipher your homework because it was soaked in the rain.*

Revise this sentence. Turn it into a compound sentence by converting *because* to a Rule #6 comma + *for*.

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.

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 couldn'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 **(6)** **or** she **may** have loved what the others were having.

YOUR TURN (continued)

- **statement A:** This is an act of madness.
 - **statement B:** This is just a coincidence.
2. Combine statements A and B into a single compound sentence joined by a Rule #6 comma + *or*. However, the verb *is* is too definite a verb to appear in a compound sentence joined by *or*. In addition to joining the two sentences together with a comma + *or*, convert the two occurrences of *is* to something less definite.

NOR

Nor has two requirements that the other conjunctions do not have:

1. a negative word (most commonly *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 **(6)** **nor** can I live without you.

YOUR TURN (continued)

3. Use *Much that is known is revealed to us* as your left-hand sentence; use *we are told fables of women that excelled of old* as your right-hand sentence.

Using steps (1) and (2) described above (a negative word on the left side, flip-flopped words on the right), combine your left-hand and right-hand sentences into a single compound sentence using a Rule #6 comma + *nor*.

ANSWERS 18

1. You couldn't decipher your homework **(6) for** it was soaked in the rain.
2. This may be an act of madness **(6) or** this may be just a coincidence.
[*would also work with might be or could be*]
3. Much that is known is **not** revealed to us **(6) nor are we** told fables of women that excelled of old.

Lesson 19: Individual Conjunctions—*But, Yet, So*

In Lesson 19, the Your Turn exercises are split into three mini-sections; the answers for all three mini-sections appear at the end of the lesson.

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, it can often create a comma-inducing pause even when the right-hand word group is less than a complete sentence.

YOUR TURN 19

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

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 (6) 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 (6) yet not one single plant ever grew.*

Wow, that *is* surprising. Usually seeds that get watered will sprout.

YOUR TURN (continued)

2. For the sentence below, the conjunction *yet* would make a slightly better choice than the conjunction *but*. Why?
- The roller coaster is engulfed in flames (6) _____ the riders continue to fling their arms straight up into the air.

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 **(6)** **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.

YOUR TURN (continued)

3. Study the sentences below. Decide which pair of sentences should be connected with a Rule #6 comma + *so* and which should be connected with *so that*. Also, be able to explain your choice.
 - **example A:** The owners of the plantation let the bananas rot in the train cars _____ the price of bananas will be driven upwards.
 - **example B:** A complete trainload of bananas has rotted _____ the price of bananas has gone up.

ANSWERS 19

1. (a) Example A receives no comma. Why not? [*Example A receives no comma because the right-hand word group is less than a complete sentence.*] (b) Example B may receive a comma. Why? [*Example B may receive a comma because but shows a contrast between the left-hand and right-hand sentences, and this contrast naturally induces a pause.*]
2. Yet makes a slightly better choice. Why? [*“Yet” does a slightly better job of capturing our surprise at the fact that these riders continue doing the “we’re-on-a-roller-coaster-so-let’s-put-our-hands-up-over-our-heads” thing despite the fact that the roller coaster is engulfed in flames.*]
 - The roller coaster is engulfed in flames **(6) yet** the riders continue to fling their arms straight up into the air.
3. Which sentence below gets a Rule #6 comma + so and which gets *so that*?
 - **example A:** The owners of the plantation let the bananas rot in the train cars **so that** the price of bananas will be driven upwards. [*Here the act of letting the bananas rot is intentional; the owners want the price of bananas to go up.*]
 - **example B:** A complete trainload of bananas has rotted **(6) so** the price of bananas has gone up. [*Here there is no intention; the increased price is what naturally happens when there are fewer bananas.*]

Lesson 20: Review of Comma Rule #6

We have concluded our study of Comma Rule #6. The following Your Turn will review what we've learned.

YOUR TURN 20

For each of the following, determine what would replace the blank.

For 14 of the 16 answers, the blank should be replaced by a comma and one of the seven conjunctions. Try to use each conjunction twice.

Two of the sentences are not compound sentences at all. For those two, the blank will be replaced by *and* without a comma. (So *and* will get used four times altogether.)

In this Your Turn, *but* and *yet* are interchangeable.

the coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*

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.
5. It's morning come again ____ she begins to sing above the soup.
7. My dreams alone I remember ____ I see them at night.
3. 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.

1. She notices that he's made it halfway ____ she can't stop the cars rushing towards him.
2. Some days I stand here until I lose my focus ____ drift off out of the moment.
3. The chemist said it would be all right ____ I've never been the same.
4. The dial stirs ____ none perceive that it moves.
5. The wound she gives may not be healed ____ I have fled over plains and hills for refuge from so dangerous a lady.
6. You should let me alone now ____ I will show you the savage green sprouting through the obscene holes of your eyes.

ANSWERS 20

1. A window to the east will serve as well as a window to the west **(6) for** the eastern sky echoes the western sky.
2. Four flaming angels crouched on the hood **(6) but/yet** the world did not collapse. [*the slash mark indicates a choice*]
3. He might be insulting the sky **(6) or** he might only be letting go a bit of green molded plastic soldier tied to a parachute.
4. I am not Prince Hamlet **(6) nor** was I meant to be.
5. It is raining again this morning **(6) and** I am remembering that it rained then, too.
5. It's morning come again **(6) and** she begins to sing above the soup.
7. My dreams alone I remember **(6) for** I see them at night.
3. My wife wakes me with a shove **and** commences to try her sorry Deutsch with me. [*no comma—the right-hand word group is less than a sentence*]
9. Never from pure heaven have there fallen so many fires **(6) nor** have such menacing comets burned.
10. Nothing gave but the wall's sharp echo **(6) so** I swung again in anger.
11. She notices that he's made it halfway **(6) but/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. [*no comma—the right-hand word group is less than a sentence*]
13. The chemist said it would be all right **(6) but/yet** I've never been the same.
14. The dial stirs **(6) but/yet** none perceive that it moves.
15. The wound she gives may not be healed **(6) so** I have fled over plains and hills for refuge from so dangerous a lady.
16. You should let me alone now **(6) or** I will show you the savage green sprouting through the obscene holes of your eyes.

Lesson 21: Review of Comma Rules 5 and 6

This time we'll up the ante and include Comma Rule #5 in our review.

YOUR TURN 21

Ten of the following twelve sentences will need one comma. For each, decide whether the sentence needs a Rule #5 or a Rule #6 comma and where that comma should be placed.

- The answer **no comma** will be used twice.
 - In #3 below, the comma should 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 child home.
 5. That was illusion and I wanted it to dwell with us there.
 7. The austere and silent sun rode above.
 3. The bored crazy woman at the counter rented me the Taurus.
 9. The west lights fade and stars come out in heaven.
 10. They are beautiful to look at yet they are tricky.
 11. This disruption of our union with visible nature disturbs the passions or it perplexes the intellects of man.
 12. This dog responds tenderly to a friendly voice so I will honor this dog with praise and favor.

ANSWERS 21

1. From a bare patch of that poor **(5)** solitary soil sprang the flower.
2. I would not wear the shepherd's frock **(6)** nor would I bear the shepherd's crook.
3. Little Bill and I sang "Your Cheatin' Heart **(6)**" for a sudden quiet had put a hard edge on the morning.
4. Our hands may bleed **(6)** but we do not all die.
5. Parents open their shutters and call the lonely child home. [*no comma—the right-hand word group is less than a sentence*]
5. That was illusion **(6)** and I wanted it to dwell with us there.
7. The austere and silent sun rode above. [*no comma—the conjunction "and" sits between the two adjectives, so a comma is not needed*]
3. The bored **(5)** crazy woman at the counter rented me the Taurus.
3. The west lights fade **(6)** and stars come out in heaven.
10. They are beautiful to look at **(6)** yet they are tricky.
11. This disruption of our union with visible nature disturbs the passions **(6)** or it perplexes the intellects of man.
12. This dog responds tenderly to a friendly voice **(6)** so I will honor this dog with praise and favor.

Lesson 22: Multiple Comma Rules

To help us focus on one comma rule at a time, the examples throughout this series of lessons have been examples of a single comma rule. But in actual writing, we find that many sentences require the knowledge of multiple comma rules.

An example:

- Uncle Vess **(2)** a lover of great gobs of vinegar sauce **(2)** welcomed the high pressure **(4)** the little pills **(4)** and the doctor.

This sentence contains two Rule #2 commas and two Rule #4 commas.

- The appositive phrase *a lover of great gobs of vinegar sauce* appears between the subject (*Uncle Vess*) and the verb (*welcomed*) and receives a pair of Rule #2 commas.
- Three items in a series conclude the sentence, receiving two Rule #4 commas.

Another example:

- Swelling and ebbing with time **(1)** people are like a great tide **(6)** but all their works will dissolve.

This sentence contains a Rule #1 comma and a Rule #6 comma.

- The participial phrase *swelling and ebbing with time* precedes the subject *people* and receives a Rule #1 comma.
- The conjunction *but* joins two complete sentences into a compound sentence 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.

YOUR TURN 22

In this Your Turn, the commas will be given to you. Your job will be to decide which rule numbers govern those commas. Even when there are more than two commas, only two rule numbers will be used.

Here are the six comma 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.
 3. 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.

ANSWERS 22

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

Commas Glossary of Terms

added words: Words, phrases, or clauses added to a base sentence. Often, these added words need Rule #1, Rule #2, or Rule #3 commas.

adverbial subordinate clauses: Added words that begin with subordinating conjunctions. When placed in the introductory positions, adverbial subordinate clauses are punctuated with Rule #1 commas.

appositives: Added words that rename nouns. Appositives are punctuated with commas of the Rule #1, Rule #2, or Rule #3 variety, depending on where in a sentence they are placed.

asyndeton: The dropping of the conjunction before the final item in items in a series: *item 1, item 2, item 3.*

base sentence: The foundational words of all sentences, consisting of a subject-verb or subject-predicate, depending on which lens we are using to analyze a particular sentence.

compound sentence: Two sentences joined by a Rule #6 comma and a coordinating conjunction: *sentence (6) coordinating conjunction sentence.*

coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.* The mnemonic device FANBOYS can help us memorize these seven conjunctions.

interchangeable: The conjunction *and* is often interchangeable with a comma—especially with Rule #5 commas.

introductory commas: Commas that separate added words from the base sentence when those added words appear to the left of the subject in the introductory position. These are our Rule #1 commas.

items in a series: Three or more items placed in a list and separated with Rule #4 commas. All items in a series must be parallel with one another.

less than a sentence: Before placing a Rule #6 comma before a coordinating conjunction, check the sentences on each side of the conjunction. If either is less than a complete sentence, we don't use a comma in front of the conjunction.

longer prepositional phrases: Phrases that receive Rule #1 commas when

those phrases are in the introductory position and are five words or longer. (The *five words* is an arbitrary rule of thumb that can be reduced or increased as needed.)

medial commas: Commas that separate added words from the base sentence when those added words appear in the medial or middle position (usually) between the subject and verb. These are our Rule #12 commas, and they always come in pairs.

parallel structure: When items are arranged with other items (as in items in a series), those items must be parallel—of the same grammatical structure. Noun phrases match noun phrases, gerund phrases match gerund phrases, etc.

participial phrases: Added words that begin with *-ing* and *-ed* words and function as adjectives. Participial phrases are punctuated with commas of the Rule #1, Rule #2, or Rule #3 variety, depending on where in a sentence they are placed.

polysyndeton: An arrangement of items in a series in which all items are connected by a conjunction (usually *and*) rather than commas: *item 1 and item 2 and item 3*.

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*

relative clauses: Added words that begin with *who* and *which*, most notably. Nonrestrictive relative clauses are punctuated with commas of the Rule #2 or Rule #3 variety, depending on where in a sentence they are placed.

repetition of key words: A stylish device that can be employed by arranging items in a series so that each item begins with the same word or word. Repeating key words emphasizes the parallel nature of the items in the series.

sentences in a series: A type of items in a series, except that each item is a short and simple complete sentence: *sentence, sentence, sentence*.

series comma: The comma before the conjunction when items are listed in a series. In academic writing, we do use the series comma.

standard method: With items in a series, the standard method for

configuring three items is *item 1, item 2, and item 3*.

subject-verb (or) subject-predicate: The foundational parts of all sentences. The introductory, medial, and terminal positions in a sentence are understood in relation to the subject-verb or subject-predicate of a sentence.

subordinating conjunctions: Words such as *after, although, as, because, before, if, since, so that, though, till, unless, until, when, and while*.

terminal comma: Commas that separate added words from the base sentence when those added words appear to the right of the base sentence in the terminal position. These are our Rule #3 commas.

two adjectives: When two adjectives sit side-by-side to the left of the noun they are describing, we separate those two adjectives with a Rule #5 comma.

Test Questions

Here is your chance to put your comma skill to work. Below, you will find 40 sentences divided into four parts of ten sentences each. For each, identify where commas should be placed and provide a rule number for each comma.

Note that as you read the sentences, your skill as a reader helps you determine where commas belong. Good readers know when to pause, when to slow down, and when to change the cadence or inflection of the reading voice.

Tips:

For some of these sentences, only one comma rule applies; for others, two comma rules apply.

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*. A *no commas* sentence will be one of the following three types:

- a sentence that looks like a compound sentence but isn't
- polysyndeton (*item and item and item*)
- two adjectives joined by *and* instead of a comma
- an adverbial subordinate clause in the terminal position

How many of each:

Of the 40 sentences below, 25 consist of a single comma rule; 11 require two rules; 4 will need no comma at all.

Here are the six comma rules:

- **rule 1:** introductory
- **rule 2:** medial
- **rule 3:** terminal
- **rule 4:** items in a series
- **rule 5:** two adjectives
- **rule 6:** compound sentences

TEST PART 1

1. After the climate had turned sour the desperate solitary fantasy changed into nothing more than fence-sitting.
2. As the clouds continue to darken I swim this narrow swift river.
3. 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.
4. Greta Garbo a political officer in Paris listens attentively to a voice from the next room.
5. Happiness lands its single-engine plane on a grassy strip hitchhikes into town and inquires at every door until he finds you.
5. He has something important to tell me yet his mouth spits mud when he tries to talk.
7. He wriggled and wriggled till at last he had come down from the high unimaginable hook.
3. His brown skin hung in strips like full-blown roses stained with the losses of age.
9. His French Mademoiselle is a stout plain disciple.
10. 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.

TEST ANSWERS PART 1

1. After the climate had turned sour **(1)** the desperate **(5)** solitary fantasy changed into nothing more than fence-sitting.
2. As the clouds continue to darken **(1)** I swim this narrow swift river.
3. Christopher Columbus **(2)** having learned that the living sea contains no dragons that gnaw on drowned sailors' brains **(2)** begged that he be buried with his chains.
4. Greta Garbo **(2)** a political officer in Paris **(2)** listens attentively to a voice from the next room.
5. Happiness lands its single-engine plane on a grassy strip **(4)** hitchhikes into town **(4)** and inquires at every door until he finds you.
5. He has something important to tell me **(6)** yet his mouth spits mud when he tries to talk.
7. He wriggled and wriggled till at last he had come down from the high **(5)** unimaginable hook.
3. His brown skin hung in strips like full-blown roses **(3)** stained with the losses of age.
9. His French Mademoiselle is a stout **(5)** plain disciple.
10. I thought of the coarse flesh **(4)** the big bones **(4)** the little bones **(4)** the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails **(4)** and the pink swim-bladder.

TEST PART 2

1. 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.
2. Moving in the dark the wind sweeps across the water.
3. My brain is being battered by this music which does its best to destroy the gray matter within my skull.
4. My father races past barn and field and silo ripping furrows in the backroads.
5. My two-pointed ladder is nowhere to be seen nor are there any barrels left to fill.
6. Perhaps there are more apples left to pick but I am done with apple-picking now.
7. She scratches on my window and tosses her hair and snares lightning and hawks and swarms of butterflies.
8. She whispered to me so that my eyes turned backward in their sockets.
9. She would fly far away into the sky and never fly again to my straw bed.
10. Shrieking with ape excitement they danced around the pit flinging sharp flints in vain.

TEST ANSWERS PART 2

1. I will try to bring order from this disorder **(6)** yet I will enjoy the freedom that now eludes my grasp **(3)** knowing that the river will continue to flow.
2. Moving in the dark **(1)** the wind sweeps across the water.
3. My brain is being battered by this music **(3)** which does its best to destroy the gray matter within my skull.
4. My father races past barn and field and silo **(3)** ripping furrows in the backroads.
5. My two-pointed ladder is nowhere to be seen **(6)** nor are there any barrels left to fill.
6. Perhaps there are more apples left to pick **(6)** but I am done with apple-picking now.
7. She scratches on my window and tosses her hair and snares lightning and hawks and swarms of butterflies. [*polysyndeton*]
8. She whispered to me so that my eyes turned backward in their sockets. [*adverbial subordinate clause in the terminal position needs no comma*]
9. She would fly far away into the sky and never fly again to my straw bed. [*no comma—the right-hand word group is less than a sentence*]
10. Shrieking with ape excitement **(1)** they danced around the pit **(3)** flinging sharp flints in vain.

TEST PART 3

21. Snow and mud went flying splashing the girls.
22. Stricken with foreboding they pleaded and got angry but still she was silent.
23. The ambulance pulsing out red light like an artery floats down past beacons dips down and brakes speed.
24. The cold familiar wind shakes the branches all about them.
25. The deep and chill evening thickens after each lightning flash.
26. The diggers rest on their cold rusted shovels speaking softly in French.
27. The firelight playing on the leaning walls dies down and is lost.
28. The frightening gills fresh and crisp with blood breathed in the terrible oxygen that can cut so badly.
29. The human child goes away to the waters and the wild for the world's more full of weeping than we can understand.
30. The monarchs were perplexed with fear yet the archangel shone above them sending thunderous rain to the earth below.

TEST ANSWERS PART 3

1. Snow and mud went flying (3) splashing the girls.
2. Stricken with foreboding (1) they pleaded and got angry (6) but still she was silent.
3. The ambulance (2) pulsing out red light like an artery (2) floats down past beacons (4) dips down (4) and brakes speed.
4. The cold (5) familiar wind shakes the branches all about them.
5. The deep and chill evening thickens after each lightning flash. [*the two adjectives are joined by “and,” so no comma is needed*]
6. The diggers rest on their cold (5) rusted shovels (3) speaking softly in French.
7. The firelight (2) playing on the leaning walls (2) dies down and is lost.
8. The frightening gills (2) fresh and crisp with blood (2) breathed in the terrible oxygen that can cut so badly.
9. The human child goes away to the waters and the wild (6) for the world’s more full of weeping than we can understand.
10. The monarchs were perplexed with fear (6) yet the archangel shone above them (3) sending thunderous rain to the earth below.

TEST PART 4

31. The thin fragile bridge traversed the river which was wide and swift.
32. There's no one to say whether the shy quiet people intended religion or magic or made their tracings into art.
33. This invites the occult mind cancels our physics with a sneer and spatters all we know across the wicked convenient stones.
34. This mechanism which took life when the various sections assembled themselves together seeks the healing of time of patience and of a difficult repentance.
35. 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.
36. Though we might stumble under its load we all bear Hope's burden.
37. 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.
38. We find mottled clouds patches of standing water the scattering of tall trees.
39. When they met a goose they ran fearfully away.
40. While the children run the grandmothers bask in the twilight sun.

TEST ANSWERS PART 4

31. The thin (5) fragile bridge traversed the river (3) which was wide and swift.
32. There's no one to say whether the shy (5) quiet people intended religion or magic or made their tracings into art.
33. This invites the occult mind (4) cancels our physics with a sneer (4) and spatters all we know across the wicked (5) convenient stones.
34. This mechanism (2) which took life when the various sections assembled themselves together (2) seeks the healing of time (4) of patience (4) and of a difficult repentance.
35. This print of mine (2) which has kept its color alive through so many cleanings (2) continues to serve me as the clothes I wear to work (4) to bed (4) and to my grave.
36. Though we might stumble under its load (1) we all bear Hope's burden.
37. Today the tide is low (6) and the black shells of mussels (2) which are exposed to the risk of air (2) wave in and out of the waterline.
38. We find mottled clouds (4) patches of standing water (4) the scattering of tall trees.
39. When they met a goose (1) they ran fearfully away.
40. While the children run (1) the grandmothers bask in the twilight sun.

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