
Basic Comma Rules

In English, we learn to read by learning to predict a language pattern of

SUBJECT VERB (OBJECT OPTIONAL).

If any words or phrases interrupt that pattern, readers need to be notified of this interruption so that they don't stumble over the interruption.

The most common way to notify readers of an interruption in the SUBJECT/VERB/OBJECT pattern is the **COMMA**.

In standard, academic English, there are five basic ways that the comma notifies the reader of interruption.

1. To let the reader know an **introductory or subordinate clause or phrase** has preceded the SVO pattern or follows the SVO pattern and begins with "which"

As I started writing the paper, I began to wish that I had already finished the assignment.
I began to wish that I had already finished the assignment, **which I had just started**.

2. To let the reader know a **nonessential phrase/clause (renaming of a noun)** interrupts the SVO pattern

As I started writing the paper, **a treatise on American business**, I began to wish that I had already finished the assignment.

3. To let the reader know that a **conjunctive adverb (an adverb used for emphasis)** interrupts the SVO pattern

Because I started writing the paper when I was already exhausted, **subsequently**, I began to wish that I had already finished the assignment.

4. To let the reader know that **two adjectives share equal significance** for the noun they modify

As I started writing the paper, I enjoyed an **elaborate, private** wish that I had already finished the assignment.

5. To let the reader know that **items in a series** are being listed

As I started writing the paper, I **wished, hoped, and prayed** that I had already finished.

****Note:** The most effective and easy-to-read items in a series have *parallel construction*, which means, in this case, that all of the **verbs are conjugated in the same tense** (wished, hoped, prayed).

As I started **writing the paper, reading my notes, and looking at the clock**, I began to wish that I had already finished the assignment.

****Note:** The **gerund form (ing) is repeated for each item** in this series *to create parallel construction*. Additionally, the gerund creates a sense of immediacy or action in the sentence.

As I started writing the paper, I wished that I had already finished **the paper, the course, and the degree program**.

****Note:** The **article** (in this case, the) **is repeated in front of each noun** in each item in the series *to create parallel construction*.

****Note:** *Not all disciplines require a comma in front of the final item in the series.* Check with your instructor or your citation manual if you are unsure of a discipline's standards.

Now that you know the basic "hows" and "whys" of comma rules, here's one rule for **when NOT to use a comma**:

In front of the word "because."

As I started writing the paper, I began to wish that I had finished because I was tired.

****Note:** "because" is a long word, a word big enough to warn the reader of its position as introducing a clause/phrase at the beginning or the ending of a sentence.