

Notes on using commas

Here are explanations and examples of some of the different uses of commas. If you're not familiar with some of the terminology used, just focus on the examples and match them to what you want to write.

1. Commas in Lists

Commas are used to separate items in lists. Usually there is no comma before the final item:

It was important to document times, quantities and results.

However, sometimes an additional comma is needed to make the elements of the list clear:

We considered resources, health and safety, and cost.

2. Commas to separate subordinate clauses

A *clause* is a group of words normally containing a *verb* and its *subject*. A *main clause* makes sense by itself, whereas a *subordinate clause* provides additional information. If a subordinate clause is not a defining (i.e. essential) part of the sentence, it should be separated from the *main clause* (the main part of a sentence) by a comma or, if it is within the sentence, a pair of commas.

The non-defining subordinate clause is highlighted in grey in the sentence below:

The literature review highlights that, although there is extensive documentation on theoretical approaches to X, little research exists on this subject area.

3. Commas to separate link words

Words forming a link between sentences are usually punctuated with a separating comma when they are at the beginning of a sentence. See the example below:

To summarise, five main theories have been highlighted.

Common linking words are: **in conclusion, for example, furthermore, hence, however, instead, moreover, nevertheless, on the contrary, so, therefore** and **thus**.

4. Commas to separate additional information

Commas are used, either individually or in pairs, to separate out additional information or 'asides'. The previous sentence contains an example of this use.

5. **Avoiding the 'split comma'**

A comma should not be used to separate two balanced statements that have equal weight: this usage is known as the 'split comma'.

Instead, a colon (:) should be used to separate a statement from a related explanation or example. A semi-colon (;) should be used where there is a link between statements but no causal connection. (Please see the separate 'Notes on colons and semi-colons'.)