

Aggie Grammar Guide: Commas and Semicolons

Using commas in your writing can improve your clarity, avoid confusion, and create natural pauses for your reader. Comma use can be mandatory, prohibited, or optional. The following list addresses all three of these cases together in seven rules. Note that the symbol \emptyset is used to mean **null** or no comma. For semicolons, while they may seem tricky, only three rules exist for their usage. Independent clauses are underlined when relevant. For more information about sentence types, comma splices, run-on sentences, and fragments, please see our Sentence Boundaries chapter.

Commas - In a Series

Use commas to separate items in a series.

- Example: My culture is not the same as Salvadorian, Cuban, or Guatemalan.

The comma before **and** is called the *Oxford comma* (or *serial comma*) and is optional. However, if you don't use it, you can sometimes cause confusion.

- Example: I'd like to thank my parents, Bob and Marcy. (With one interpretation, the parents' names are Bob and Marcy. With the other interpretation, "my parents," "Bob," and "Marcy" are all different people.)

Do NOT use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series:

- Example: The food culture in Mexico and Italy shows \emptyset similar foods, ingredients, and special occasions \emptyset that connect these two counties together.

Commas - Before Coordinating Conjunctions

Use a comma before *coordinating conjunctions* when these words connect two independent clauses. Use the mnemonic word FANBOYS (**for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**) to remember all the *coordinating conjunctions*.

- Example: I love sports very much, but I had an injury.

Do NOT use a comma before *coordinating conjunctions* when these words connect words or phrases (instead of full independent clauses).

- Example: I like sports \emptyset but not very much.

Commas - After Introductory Transition Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Use a comma after an introductory transition word such as **however**, **still**, **furthermore**, and **moreover**.

- Example: **Thus**, full hybrids are fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly.

Use a comma to separate an introductory dependent phrase or clause from the independent clause.

- Example: Before “highwheel safeties” were invented, only men were seen riding bicycles.
- Example: Holding a camera on the way to the top of the rock, she monitored their climb.

Do NOT use a comma when a dependent clause beginning with an adverb (such as **while**, **since**, **because**) FOLLOWS an independent clause.

- Example: My family has used different methods around the house to save water ∅ because my parents know how expensive the water bill can get.

Do NOT use a comma between a subject and its verb or between a verb and its *complement*.

- Example: Holding a camera on the way to the top of the rock ∅ is more challenging.
- Example: One of the two conducted experiments ∅ showed that high exposure to sexual material on TV puts virgins at a higher risk.

Commas- Surrounding (Non)-essential / (Non)-restrictive Phrases

Use commas to set off *non-essential* phrases and clauses (sometimes called *non-restrictive* phrases and clauses) which disrupt the normal flow of the sentence by providing extra information.

- Example: Chaadev, who spoke out against the regime, was punished. (The *non-essential* phrase “who spoke out against the regime” is an added detail about Chaadev which isn’t necessary information to identify Chaadev.)
- Example: The report from the European Commission shows that the only official language of France is French, which is an unfamiliar language to me. (The *non-essential* phrase “which is an unfamiliar language to me” is an added detail about French which isn’t necessary information to identify what French is.)
- Example: Craigslist is noted for its full-scale information that people are looking for such as housing, jobs, services, and pets, which are based in San Francisco. (The *non-essential* phrase “which are based in San Francisco” applies to the entire list, and only relative clauses that are *non-essential/non-restrictive* can describe a clause. Without this comma, the reader would think that only the pets are based in San Francisco.)
- Example: This is a journal report for *Chief Learning Officer*, a publication for people who want to improve their leadership and management skills. (The *non-essential* phrase “a publication for people...” gives extra information about the *Chief Learning Officer*. It is a reduced form of the phrase “which is a publication for people...” See the Relative Clause chapter for more information on reduced relative clauses.)

Do NOT use commas for *essential (restrictive)* phrases and clauses that are key to the meaning of the sentence.

- Example: The intellectuals Ø who spoke out against the regime Ø were punished. (The *essential* phrase “who spoke out against the regime” provides crucial information about who these intellectuals are.)

Commas - Around Interrupting Elements

Use commas to set off parenthetical and transitional expressions, contrasting elements, interjections, and tag questions.

- Example: Engelstein, on the other hand, uses information about the Geographical Society and free economic associations.
- Example: Cepeda brings forth the fact that, yes, the majority of Latinos in America are of Mexican decent.
- Example: All types of bikes can cause problems, not just the beach cruiser.

Commas - With Quotes

Use commas to shift back and forth between your words and a quotation. This is similar to the use of interrupting elements mentioned above.

- Example: “Thanks to the Internet,” he said, “I do not have to go outside to the cinema on such a freezing day.”

Use a comma to introduce a quotation with an introductory dependent phrase (see rule above) or following a reporting verb such as **says**, **believes**, and **argues**.

- Example: Long-Solis and Vargas claim, “Many people restrict their diet as a form of penitence at this time of year” (146).

Do NOT use a comma when you lead into a quote without a reporting verb.

- Example: Long-Solis and Vargas describe how Ø “many people restrict their diet as a form of penitence at this time of year” (146).

Commas - To Separate Items

Use a comma to separate items in dates and addresses.

- Example: On January 1st, 2015, I started work at 1 Shields Avenue, Davis, California.

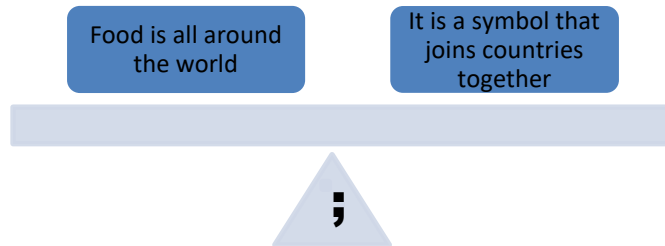
Use a comma to separate two adjectives if they could be joined by **and**.

- Example: I grew up learning history from giant, old textbooks from high school.

Semicolons - With Independent Clauses

Use a semicolon to link two independent clauses NOT joined with a *coordinating conjunction* (FANBOYS).

- Example: Food is all around the world; it is a symbol that joins countries together.



The purpose is to subtly show the relation between two clauses (rather than using a period or a comma + *coordinating conjunction*) if the relationship between the two clauses is clear.

You can still use a conjunctive adverb or transitional expression after a semicolon (**therefore, however, in fact, for example**) in order to clarify the relationship between the two independent clauses, but don't forget to use a comma after this word/phrase.

- Example: While I was sleeping, my muscles were at rest; however, my mind was awake.

Semicolons - With Complex Series

Use a semicolon to separate items in a series containing other punctuation.

- Example: To propel the car, the series hybrid uses an electric motor charged by a gasoline engine; the parallel hybrid uses both an electric motor and a gasoline engine; a mild hybrid uses a fuel engine assisted by an electric motor; and a full hybrid can use an electric motor, combustion engine, or both of them.

Semicolons - Within Parenthetical References

Use a semicolon to separate two or more sources in a single parenthetical reference.

- Example: (Ricento, 2006; Spolsky, 2004)

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Intermediate Practice

Rewrite each sentence to include commas or semicolons, as indicated. In the semicolon questions, if any commas need to be added or removed in your revision, please make these adjustments as well. Note that some variation exists with these revisions, and your revision may work even if it differs from the one given.

Example (add commas): Even though these two countries celebrate Lent they both also use or prefer different types of dishes.

Revision: Even though these two countries celebrate Lent, they both also use or prefer different types of dishes.

Example (revise to add a semicolon): I really do not like to work in groups, however I have to admit that sometimes it is very helpful.

Revision: I really do not like to work in groups; however, I have to admit that sometimes it is very helpful.

- 1) Add commas: To celebrate the graduation of my brother Aaron we must throw a big party.
- 2) Add commas: Both cultures are different yet they share the same purpose of preserving their language.
- 3) Add commas: Besides studying abroad will look amazing on future references and work applications.
- 4) Add commas: For example she did research on babies who were learning to speak Koro Japanese and English.
- 5) Add commas: “The Language of Silence” by Maxine Hong Kingston who is one of the greatest writers in the United States documents the author’s difficulties in speaking since a very young age.
- 6) Add commas: Around 1816 Von Drais a German baron built the first known bicycle a two-wheeled wooden walking machine.
- 7) Add commas: Today social media has become I fear a strong part of people’s lives.

- 8) Add commas: Lewis (2015) shows that there are over 75,000,000 people who speak French as a first language and over 87,000,000 people who use French as a second language; also 53 countries use French as an official language.
- 9) Revise to add a semicolon: People need to start saving water, in many cases people are unaware of the impacts of having a water drought.
- 10) Revise to add a semicolon: I have a blog about some serious but important aspects about college life, and this blog will be a great reference for incoming college freshmen.
- 11) Revise to add a semicolon: Many undergraduate and graduate students consider studying abroad while in college. Although the reasons vary from person to person.
- 12) Revise to add a semicolon: That is why it is important for cultural values to continue in Inupiat communities because they allow them to reflect on their cultural values and see their importance in the Inupiat community.

Advanced Practice

Correct the comma and semicolon use in the following paragraph. Please note, there may be multiple revision options although you will see only one revision in the answer key. Compare your revision to the one provided and determine if one is more effective.

Example: The surrounding images of the personified rose and worm cause the reader to grasp a better understanding of the speaker's feeling towards love; or the lack of love he faced. Ultimately the components of the imagery, figurative language, and setting bestow a mood of gloom, sadness, and betrayal.

Revision: The surrounding images of the personified rose and worm cause the reader to grasp a better understanding of the speaker's feeling towards love or the lack of love he faced. Ultimately, the components of the imagery, figurative language, and setting bestow a mood of gloom, sadness, and betrayal.

For some people biking is not just a way to get around, or a recreational pastime, it is a way of life. People utilize bikes to feel healthier both mentally and physically and to help the environment. Bicycles unite people together, since they have something in common. Bicycles are more than just a toy or exercise machine, they mean freedom from traffic jams, stress and pollution. People do not have to rely on anyone or adjust to others' agenda to get anywhere, or do anything. In addition repairing a bicycle is less expensive than repairing a car. The bicycle has many benefits besides helping people stay in shape and reducing pollution. A bike can be very beneficial if you need to go somewhere and do not want to walk or take the bus. Furthermore it can help you in times of need, for example my bicycle has gotten me out of trouble more than once when I had to race to class on a deadline, because I overslept. When I am unable to think, my bike transports me to another place, a place where "I will suddenly find myself marveling at the joy and exhilaration I feel when the breeze tickles my cheek and the pedaling suddenly becomes effortless" (Chen).

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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

- 1) To celebrate the graduation of my brother Aaron, we must throw a big party. (*essential*)
To celebrate the graduation of my brother, Aaron, we must throw a big party. (*non-essential*)
(In the essential meaning, the author has multiple brothers and so the name "Aaron" provides necessary information about which brother. In the non-essential meaning, Aaron is the only brother and so adding his name is unnecessary information as the reader will know which brother the writer refers to.)
- 2) Both cultures are different, yet they share the same purpose of preserving their language.
- 3) Besides, studying abroad will look amazing on future references and work applications.
- 4) For example, she did research on babies who were learning to speak Koro, Japanese, and English.
(No comma is used after "babies" because "who were learning..." is an *essential* phrase. The comma after "Japanese" is optional [Oxford comma].)
- 5) "The Language of Silence" by Maxine Hong Kingston, who is one of the greatest writers in the United States, documents the author's difficulties in speaking since a very young age.
- 6) Around 1816, Von Drais, a German baron, built the first known bicycle, a two-wheeled wooden walking machine.
- 7) Today, social media has become, I fear, a strong part of people's lives.
- 8) Lewis (2015) shows that there are over 75,000,000 people who speak French as a first language and over 87,000,000 people who use French as a second language; also, 53 countries use French as an official language.
- 9) People need to start saving water; in many cases, people are unaware of the impacts of having a water drought.
- 10) I have a blog about some serious, but important, aspects about college life; this blog will be a great reference for incoming college freshmen.
(The commas around "but important" are stylistically optional; it depends on whether you see this phrase as an interrupting element.)
- 11) Many undergraduate and graduate students consider studying abroad while in college; however, the reasons vary from person to person.
- 12) That is why it is important for cultural values to continue in Inupiat communities; they allow them to reflect on their cultural values and see their importance in the Inupiat community.

Advanced Practice

Revision:

For some people, biking is not just a way to get around or a recreational pastime, it is a way of life. People utilize bikes to feel healthier, both mentally and physically, and to help the environment. Bicycles unite people together since they have something in common. Bicycles are more than just a toy or exercise machine, they mean freedom from traffic jams, stress, and pollution. People do not have to rely on anyone or adjust to others' agenda to get anywhere or do anything. In addition, repairing a bicycle is less expensive than repairing a car. The bicycle has many benefits besides helping people stay in shape and reducing pollution. A bike can be very beneficial if you need to go somewhere and do not want to walk or take the bus. Furthermore, it can help you in times of need; for example, my bicycle has gotten me out of trouble more than once when I had to race to class on a deadline because I overslept. When I am unable to think, my bike transports me to another place, a place where "I will suddenly find myself marveling at the joy and exhilaration I feel when the breeze tickles my cheek and the pedaling suddenly becomes effortless" (Chen).

Note: The comma in the 4th sentence after the word "stress" is optional. The commas after the words "pastime" and "machine" in the 1st and 4th sentences, respectively, are tricky. One interpretation is that these commas should be semicolons because they seem to be separating two independent clauses. Another interpretation is that even though these clauses are grammatically independent, they are logically inseparable. (The clause "biking is not just a way to get around or a recreational pastime" is logically incomplete without "it is a way of life").