

Comma Rules: Comma-Conjunction Confusion

You are probably familiar with commas, but you may not be as familiar with the term conjunctions. **Conjunctions** link individual words or groups of words within a sentence. There are three types of conjunctions: coordinating conjunctions, correlative conjunctions, and subordinating conjunctions.

1. **Coordinating conjunctions: and, or, but, nor, so, for, yet.** These conjunctions link coordinate or grammatically equal parts of sentences.

Include a comma when a **coordinating conjunction connects two independent clauses**. An **independent clause** is a group of phrases that can stand alone as an individual sentence. Place the comma before the conjunction:

- A. *I should really do my homework right now, but I'd rather go to sleep.*
- B. *Harriet likes to pick different flowers everyday, and she arranges them in vases.*

In the first example, "I should really do my homework" and "I'd rather go to sleep" could each stand alone as separate sentences, meaning they are independent clauses.

Another way to think of this rule: if the groups of words on both sides of the conjunction can be separate sentences, then place a comma before the conjunction.

EXCEPTION: If you are connecting two very short independent clauses, you may choose not to use a comma:

- C. *I like you and you like me.*

Do not use a comma when the coordinating conjunction links only words and phrases, not independent clauses:

- D. *Joe and Andy played basketball yesterday.*
- E. *Aly will only buy fruits or vegetables when going to the grocery store.*
- F. *Harriet likes to pick different flowers everyday and to arrange them in vases.*

Sentence F is very similar to sentence B, but F has no comma. Why? In sentence F, the phrase at the end of the sentence ("to arrange them in vases") cannot stand alone; it is not an independent clause. This phrase depends on the subject (Harriet) for meaning. In most cases, it should not be separated from the subject by a comma.

EXCEPTION: You could use a comma to downplay the link and emphasize the second half of the sentence:

G. *The teacher was strict, and proved it once again.*

This is especially true when the second part of the sentence contrasts strongly with the first part:

H. *The teacher was friendly, but difficult.*

The writer emphasizes the contrast between “friendly” and “difficult” by using a comma.

2. **Correlative conjunction pairs** include **either/or; neither/nor; whether/or; both/and; not only/but also**. These pairs of words connect coordinated structures in a sentence. You usually do not use a comma with correlative conjunctions:

I. *Bobby wanted both to receive an education and to find success in a future career.*

J. *Neither Jimmy nor Kate was present in class today.*

3. **Subordinating conjunctions** include, among many others, **although, after, because, while, unless, when, before, since, unless**. These conjunctions connect clauses of unequal weight or importance, making one part of the sentence dependent on the other.

If you begin a sentence with a subordinating conjunction, use a comma to separate it from the independent clause:

K. *Before walking to school in the morning, Abigail made herself some breakfast.*

If the subordinating conjunction comes after the independent clause, you usually do not need a comma:

L. *Abigail made herself some breakfast before walking to school in the morning.*

EXCEPTION: You will use a comma if the idea in the second clause is incidental to the idea in the first:

M. *Johnny will walk to school, although his foot hurts.*

In sentence M, the idea in the subordinate clause (his foot hurting) is incidental and does not affect the condition in the first clause (walking to school).