



## Scientific English: When do I use a comma?

### *Did you know?*

The comma originated in the 3rd century BC, when Aristophanes of Byzantium invented a system of dots to indicate the amount of breath needed to read aloud pieces of text. For a short passage, a *komma* was a dot placed at mid-level ( · ).

### **DO use a comma:**

- ✓ **Between two sentences (independent clauses) joined by *for, and, nor, but, or, yet* or *so* (FANBOYS):**

The nurse interviewed the patients, and the doctor obtained informed consent.  
The scan was not done according to study guidelines, so it was repeated two weeks later.  
Tests showed that the tumour had shrunk, but the patient still experienced headaches.

- ✓ **After introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main sentence:**

After collecting the blood samples, the nurse interviewed each patient individually.  
However, research is lacking in this area.  
If symptoms persist, contact your physician.  
Since it was late, they decided to end the meeting.  
Following three physiotherapy sessions, the swimmers resumed their training regimen.

- ✓ **To interrupt a sentence or give extra information before the main sentence:**

Sleeping pills, which had previously been forbidden, were offered to participants.  
Odense Hospital, where the trial took place, serves as an acute care hospital for the region.  
After the course, which was provided free of charge, the swimmers resumed their training regimen.

## DO use a comma:

✓ **Between a list of three or more words or phrases:**

Neurological signals are slowed, altered, or blocked altogether.

Drink plenty of water before, during, and after exercising.

Occupational therapists can help people whose condition prevents them from taking care of themselves, participating in work, or enjoying leisure activities.

*Note: The comma after the second-to-last item is known as the Oxford comma or serial comma. Although debated, the serial comma tends to be used because it prevents ambiguity.*

*Look at this sentence:* The giraffe eats shoots and leaves.

*And now this one!* The giraffe eats, shoots, and leaves.

*And is there any ambiguity in this sentence?* In the final round of the cooking competition, the contestants had to prepare three different quiches: broccoli, ham and cheese and spinach.

✓ **To avoid confusion or ambiguity:**

Outside her skin was cold. → Outside, her skin was cold.

✓ **To avoid unnecessary repetition of words:**

In 2010 there were seven cases and in 1995, four.

✓ **To set off phrases that show a contrast or a distinct pause:**

The questionnaires were completed separately, not as a battery of tests.

The medication is highly effective, but costly.

✓ **To introduce quoted words:**

One respondent said, 'Daily planning increased the efficiency of our department.'

*(But not when you use 'that' e.g. One respondent said that it helped her to talk with the patient in a more constructive way.)*

✓ **Between coordinating adjectives** (adjectives that can be separated with the word *and*)

Dry, itchy skin is one of the side effects. (Dry and itchy skin is one of the side effects.)

Small metal plates were inserted into the bone. *(No comma is used here because we cannot write 'small and metal plates'.)*

✓ **When mentioning a city's name and state, region, or country.**

We did the study in Odense, Denmark, and Trondheim, Norway.

The lab is located in Houston, Texas.

## DO NOT use a comma

### To set off essential elements of a sentence:

He was the doctor (x) who co-authored the book.  
It was interesting (x) that no one reported adverse effects.

### When a dependent clause follows a main clause:

We repeated the experiment (x) because the samples got contaminated.

### To separate a subject and verb:

The best way to succeed (x) is to learn from one's mistakes.

### To separate two items on a list:

The main symptoms were joint pain (x) and swelling of the extremities.

I have spent most of the day putting  
in a comma and the rest of the day  
taking it out.

– *Oscar Wilde*