



No Comma Drama (Part Two)

In the October issue, we talked about three different situations that require a comma: to punctuate items in a series of three or more, to separate two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction, and to set off nonessential matter anywhere in the sentence. This month, we'll tackle the three other major uses for commas: to set off introductory matter, to separate coordinate adjectives, and to set off a direct quotation of 50 words or fewer.

4. Use a comma to set off introductory matter, especially where an introductory phrase answers where, when, why, how, or to what extent the following matter occurred. For example:

- Before signing, parties should read the agreement carefully.
- As a result, summary judgment is appropriate.
- In federal court, attorneys generally dress more conservatively.

Where you have a brief introductory phrase, and the verb follows that phrase closely, the comma becomes more discretionary than mandatory:

- During trial plaintiff left the courtroom several times. (vs. During trial, plaintiff left the courtroom several times.)
- After dinner Petey shredded my napkin. (vs. After dinner, Petey shredded my napkin.)
- Soon the Court will issue its decision. (vs. Soon, the Court will issue its decision.)

If you've read my other columns on commas, it may not surprise you to learn that I favor the comma even where the introductory phrase is brief.

You always use a comma, however, where the short introductory (or closing) word or phrase constitutes a direct address:

- Your Honor, the defense misrepresents the law.
- Jennifer, please tell the jury what you saw next.
- Have you seen *Magic Mike XXL*, Susie?

5. Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives and adverbs. Coordinate adjectives and adverbs modify the noun or verb rather than each other. For example:

- The suspect is a tall, slim, handsome chauffeur. (*Tall, slim, and handsome* all modify *chauffeur*.)
- Ted Bundy was a *vicious, remorseless, diabolical* killer. (*Vicious, remorseless, and diabolical* all modify *killer*.)
- A rogue officer *deliberately, systematically* concealed exculpatory evidence. (*Deliberately* and *systematically* modify *concealed*.)

Even where both adjectives modify the same noun, however, you do not separate them with a comma where the final adjective and the noun form a phrase:

- As he grew, it became clear that Petey would not be a big yellow Labrador.
- Nina Totenberg, an excellent legal reporter, elucidated the Court's reasoning.

In the first example, *big* modifies the unit *yellow Labrador*. Similarly, in the second

example, *excellent* modifies the unit *legal reporter*. In those cases, a comma compromises clarity. If you said that Nina Totenberg was an excellent, legal reporter, for instance, your reader might think you intended to invoke her immigration status.

Several tricks can help determine whether adjectives or adverbs are coordinate. First, see whether using each one alone with the noun or

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verb makes sense. The suspect was a tall chauffeur? Check. The suspect was a slim chauffeur? Check. The suspect was a handsome chauffeur? Check. You have coordinate adjectives and should separate them with a comma. The officer deliberately concealed evidence? Check. The officer systematically concealed evidence? Check. You have coordinate adverbs and should separate them with a comma.

You also can test this by inserting an *and* between the adjectives. The tall and dark and handsome chauffeur? That works. You have coordinate adjectives and should separate them with a comma.



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Finally, with coordinate adjectives, you should be able to change the order of the adjectives without affecting the meaning. For example, the suspect could be a handsome, tall, slim chauffeur or a slim, tall, handsome chauffeur. The sentence works either way. By contrast, you would not say that Nina Totenberg is a legal excellent reporter. That makes no sense.

6. Use a comma to set off a direct quotation of fewer than 50 words:

- The judge said, “Mr. Stinson, if you don’t stop trying to high-five the jurors, I will have to hold you in contempt.”

There are two exceptions to this general rule. First, do not set off the quotation if you weave it into the sentence itself:

- The judge warned Mr. Stinson that she would hold him in contempt unless he stopped “trying to high-five the jurors.”

Second, in some instances, you may wish to set off the quotation with a colon instead of a comma:

- The judge warned Mr. Stinson: “If you don’t try to high-five the jurors, I will have to hold you in contempt.”

You also use a comma in a few other, narrow instances:

- To segment numbers of more than three digits
- To punctuate full dates written month-date-year
- After the salutation in a personal letter or email

Next time a comma tempts, check your situation against the list set forth in these two columns. If it fits one of the examples given, comma away! If not, exercise restraint, and save that inflection for another occasion. 