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## The Six Rules for Using Commas\*

1. Put a comma before *and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so* when they connect two independent clauses.

*What is an independent clause?*

It is any group of words with a subject and verb that can stand alone.

He cooked dinner.

I washed the dishes.

If you want to connect two independent clauses, insert a comma (it separates) and one of the conjunctions mentioned above (it joins).

He cooked dinner, **but** I washed the dishes.

### Some examples to try:

- ☞ Light availability is an important factor in biologic communities most vegetative associations are layered.
- ☞ Cold-blooded animals become inactive in cold weather and hibernate to conserve energy.
- ☞ Shrubs are defined as woody plants with several stems trees are defined as having a single trunk.

2. Put a comma between three or more items in a series.

Biologic attributes that minimize heat loss are feathers, hair, and winter fat.

Note that there is a comma before *and*. Some books suggest the removal of the comma before *and* in some cases; however, you will always be correct if you include it.

This comma rule works for most situations, but there are some words that “go together” and don’t need a comma between them even if they are in a series.

He wore rumpold old blue pants.

The way to tell the difference is to insert the word *and* into the series (He wore rumpold *and* old *and* blue pants). If this sounds funny, then chances are you don’t need commas.

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\* Adapted from *The Least you Should Know About English* by Teresa Ferster Glazier

The insertion of *and* sounds much better for the sentence above that does need commas (...feathers *and* hair *and* winter fat).

### Some examples to try:

- ☞ The human degradation is also evident in the substandard housing lack of jobs poor or no health care noise pollution congestion and lack of social services.
- ☞ Good data is valuable information for urban planners as they plan for the future of an ever-increasing urban population.
- ☞ Cities with comfortable healthful environmentally safe human habitats are a requirement for 21<sup>st</sup> century sustainable living.

### 3. Put a comma after an introductory expression that doesn't flow smoothly into the sentence.

In 1992, 35 million couples in the United States used some form of birth control.  
Of the 192 cities surveyed, the 22 cities that score the highest marks are scattered.

Words such as *although*, *because*, *even though* or *of* may indicate an introductory expression.

Some books suggest that an introductory expression containing three words or fewer does not need commas. It is the best policy, however, to consistently place commas after any introductory expression.

### Some examples to try:

- ☞ Thus data for the urban resources planner are available in a variety of formats.
- ☞ As the plants resume activity after winter dormancy water travels through the living tissue and green leaves are produced.
- ☞ Although "pharmaceutical care" is great in theory many pharmacists who are used to simply dispensing medications have significant difficulty learning to monitor patients and consult with physicians.

### 4. Put a comma before an afterthought that is tacked onto the end of a sentence.

Scientists are still calling her Eve, but reluctantly.

### An example to try:

- ☞ Given this new information global warming is already happening isn't it?

### 5. Put commas around an expression that interrupts the flow of the sentence (words such as *however*, *moreover*, *finally*, *therefore*, *of course*, *by the way*, *on the other hand*, *I am sure*, *I think*, or *someone's name*).

Vegetation responds, therefore, to changes in parent material.  
Population rate decreases are, of course, correlated with diseases.  
I would love to come, Michelle, but I am very busy.

Sometimes, though, similar expressions do not interrupt the flow of the sentence and therefore don't need commas.

The human population continues to increase irregularly; therefore disease remains an important regulator of population growth. (Putting a comma after *therefore* is optional, depending on how you want the sentence to sound.)

### Some examples to try:

- ☞ The ten categories therefore are defined based on the highest values.
- ☞ However many rural residents are employed in agriculture, forestry or other natural-resource-based jobs.
- ☞ The fertility rates finally increased enough to balance losses to disease.
- ☞ Planned growth is more desirable than uncontrolled growth; furthermore it is more profitable.

### 6. Put commas around nonessential material.

Miriam Tilden, who heads the hospital volunteers, will speak tonight.

To decide if part of the sentence is nonessential it is good to ask, "Interesting, but is it necessary?" The phrase *who heads the hospital volunteers* is not essential to the main idea of the sentence. In the following example, however, this phrase is essential to the main idea of the sentence.

The woman who heads the hospital volunteers will speak tonight.

### Some examples to try:

- ☞ When the man returned from space travel according to Einstein he would be younger than his twin.
- ☞ Steve Kaufman is two years older two inches taller and rather more realistic than he used to be as a freshman.
- ☞ Most of the papers that were read today have been revised.

# Answers

## Section 1

- ☞ Light availability is an important factor in biologic communities, so most vegetative associations are layered.
- ☞ Cold-blooded animals become inactive in cold weather and hibernate to conserve energy. (no comma needed)
- ☞ Shrubs are defined as woody plants with several stems, but trees are defined as having a single trunk.

## Section 2

- ☞ The human degradation is also evident in the substandard housing, lack of jobs, poor or no health care, noise pollution, congestion, and lack of social services.
- ☞ Good data is valuable information for urban planners as they plan for the future of an ever-increasing urban population. (no commas needed)
- ☞ Cities with comfortable, healthful, environmentally safe human habitats are a requirement for 21<sup>st</sup> century sustainable living.

## Section 3

- ☞ Thus, data for the urban resources planner are available in a variety of formats.
- ☞ As the plants resume activity after winter dormancy, water travels through the living tissue and green leaves are produced.
- ☞ Although “pharmaceutical care” is great in theory, many pharmacists who are used to simply dispensing medications have significant difficulty learning to monitor patients and consult with physicians.

## Section 4

- ☞ Given this new information, global warming is already happening, isn't it?

## Section 5

- ☞ The ten categories, therefore, are defined based on the highest values.
- ☞ However, many rural residents are employed in agriculture, forestry or other natural-resource-based jobs.
- ☞ The fertility rates finally increased enough to balance losses to disease. (no commas needed)
- ☞ Planned growth is more desirable than uncontrolled growth; furthermore, it is more profitable.

## Section 6

- ☞ When the man returned from space travel, according to Einstein, he would be younger than his twin.
- ☞ Steve Kaufman is two years older, two inches taller, and rather more realistic than he used to be as a freshman.
- ☞ Most of the papers that were read today have been revised.