



October 18, 2016

Writing Tip of the Week

Correct Use of the Comma—Part 1

Commas are frequently used, and frequently missed, punctuation marks. They were invented to help readers comprehend information. There are many ways to use a comma. Listed below are some of the most critical uses for commas.

- **Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining two main/independent clauses.**

There are seven coordinating conjunctions: “and,” “but,” “or,” “for,” “nor,” “so,” “yet.”

[The prosecutor spoke about the defendant’s motive], and [the jury listened carefully].

Independent Clause

Conjunction Independent Clause

- **Use a comma to set off long introductory clauses or phrases from the main/independent clauses.**

If an introductory clause precedes a main/independent clause, the comma will be needed to set off the place where the introductory material ends. Long introductory *clauses* that must be set off with a comma are easy to spot. They will have a subject and a verb because they are clauses, and will begin with a subordinating conjunction such as “after,” “although,” “as,” “because,” “before,” “if,” “unless,” “until,” “when,” or “where.”

[As the Court of Appeals noted], [delivery would require actual possession by the accused].

Introductory Clause

Independent Clause

Long introductory *phrases* are often made up of several prepositional phrases or of a combination of prepositional, infinitive, and participial phrases.

[On the evening] [of March 4, 2003], James Black was robbed at gunpoint while walking to his car.

Two Introductory Prepositional Phrases

[At the hearing] [on Johnson’s motion] [to dismiss], the parties stipulated to the admission of an incident

Two Introductory Prepositional Phrases

Infinitive Phrase

report prepared by Johnson’s probation officer.

An introductory phrase or clause of four or more words is usually considered “long,” and is, therefore, set off with a comma. Even short prepositional phrases, however, are often set off with commas, especially for emphasis.

[In 2001], the Smiths built the first addition to their house.

Short Prepositional Phrase