Journalism Style

Using Commas to Set Off Introductory Matter and Nonessential Matter

In the Chapter 14 *Journalism Style*, you learned that commas are used to set off introductory and nonessential matter. Here is extended information about these topics.

Using Commas to Set Off Introductory Matter

Strong journalism thrives on right-branching sentences, that is, sentences that start with a subject and a verb—a who and a what—and add other material to the right of the subject and verb.

Introductory elements are left branching, that is, they appear before the main subject and verb of the sentence. They slow down the flow of information. Sometimes journalists use them consciously for a stylistic effect, such as creating suspense. Sometimes they cannot be helped. Words such as *no* and *yes*, for instance, are set off by commas, as in *Yes, it has been a century since World War I, but world leaders are bedeviled by the same issues and geography then as now*.

Introductory matter generally comes in one of three shapes: adverbial clauses, prepositional phrases and participial phrases.

Adverbial Clauses

Adverbial clauses contain a subject and verb and begin with a subordinating conjunction. They often tell when, where and why or indicate opposition or condition. The table lists common subordinating conjunctions.

Common Subordinating Conjunctions

When	Where	Why	Opposition	Condition
after	wherever	because	although	if
before	when	since	though	only if
when whenever		now that	even though	even if
while		as	while	as if
since		in order that	rather than	unless
until		so so that		whether whether or not
now that		why		in case
once		whereas		provided that
as as long as				than
before				as though
until				

When adverbial clauses are introductory, they usually require a comma. (When they come after the main clause, they are not separated by a comma.)

When: *When he arrived, I was not there.* BUT *I was not there when he arrived.* Note: When the clause is short and the meaning is clear, the comma may be omitted.

Where: *Wherever she puts her keys, she loses them.* BUT *She loses her keys wherever she puts them.*

Why: *Because she calls me so often, I rarely answer.* BUT *I rarely answer because she calls me so often.*

How—under what condition: *Although he is almost six feet tall, he weighs only 130 pounds.* BUT *He weighs only 130 pounds although he is almost six feet tall.*

How—in opposition to what: *Rather than call his girlfriend, he shot hoops.* BUT *He shot hoops rather than call his girlfriend.*

Copyright Goodheart-Willcox Co., Inc. May not be posted to a publicly accessible website.

Try It!

Choose five subordinating conjunctions, one from each column of the table above. Write a sentence using each conjunction two ways. In the first, use the conjunction with a subordinate clause as an introductory element—in a left-branching sentence. In the second, start with the main clause and use the subordinate clause later in the sentence—a right-branching sentence. Use commas appropriately.

Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase includes a preposition and a noun (the object of the preposition). It may include modifiers as well.

The table shows the most common prepositions.

Common Prepositions				
about	before	despite	of	through
above	behind	down	off	throughout
across	below beneath	during	on	to
after	beside	except	onto	toward
against	between	for	out	under
along	beyond	from	outside	underneath
among	but	in	over	until
around	by	inside	past	up
as		into	since	upon
at		like		with
		near		within

Some of these words—for example, *but*, *as*, *after*—may also serve as conjunctions. But when they serve as prepositions, they lack a verb. *After their pointless fight, they left the dance.* Here, *after* is a preposition beginning a prepositional phrase. It has no verb. In contrast, when *after* is a conjunction, it has a verb and should be separated from the following main clause by a comma. *After he pushed Send, he wished he hadn't.* Here, *after* is a conjunction introducing a subordinate clause that includes the verb *pushed*. The usage is what makes the difference.

When you begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase, use a comma unless the phrase is short and the meaning is clear without a comma.

Except for the ketchup incident, the picnic was a great success. (The comma increases clarity.)

During the day he worked; at night he played in the band. (No comma is needed for clarity.)

If you begin a sentence with two or more prepositional phrases, use a comma after the final introductory phrase but not between the phrases.

In the New York Times on Sunday, the review appeared.

That sentence has a very slow start for journalism. It is much too left-branching. When you move the introductory elements to the right, you need no commas and you have a stronger journalistic sentence.

The review appeared in the New York Times on Sunday.

Participial Phrases

A participle looks like a verb but acts as an adjective.

The shaken passengers recounted their ordeal.

Shaken is an adjective modifying *passengers*, even though it looks like a past-tense verb.

A participial phrase contains a participle and its modifiers and complements. (Phrases lack a subject or lack a verb. Otherwise, they would be clauses.)

Enraged by his deception, the queen plotted revenge.

Participles are also formed from present-tense verbs using the *ing* form.

Turning the corner, he was startled to see a large assembly of clowns.

Try It!

1. Write a sentence using a past participle as an adjective.
2. Write a sentence using a present participle as an adjective.

Using Commas to Set Off Nonessential Matter

Journalists use commas to indicate nonessential information. The reader then can tell what is essential and what is of lesser importance.

If you take out an essential element, you change the meaning of the sentence. Essential matter is NOT set off with commas. *None of the jars that are on the top shelf contain poison.* If the clause *that are on the top shelf* were removed, the sentence would have a very different meaning.

If you take out nonessential matter, you do not substantially change the meaning of the sentence. Nonessential matter is set apart from the rest of the

Copyright Goodheart-Willcox Co., Inc. May not be posted to a publicly accessible website.

sentence with commas (or sometimes with dashes or parentheses).

Nonessential matter that should be set apart with commas includes parenthetical expressions, nonessential appositives, nonessential phrases and nonessential clauses.

Parenthetical Expressions

Parenthetical expressions are words or phrases used to explain or qualify a statement. The sentence would still make good sense without the matter set off by the commas. In journalism parenthetical expressions most often appear in oral interviews and in writing that attempts to seem casual. Although they are called parenthetical expressions and may be set within parentheses, they are most often set apart with commas.

Our car, I believe, is over there. (Not substantially different from *Our car is over there*.)

You know, of course, that he is from Japan. (Not substantially different from *You know that he is from Japan*.)

The mountains are, in fact, much taller than they seem. (Not substantially different from *The mountains are much taller than they seem*.)

Expressions often used parenthetically include *of course*, *consequently*, *for example*, *in fact*, *I believe*, *on the other hand*, *by the way*, *after all*, *nevertheless*, *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*.

Nonessential Appositives

Appositives follow a noun or noun phrase and explain or identify it.

His mother, a Muggle-born witch, also went to Hogwarts. In this sentence, *a Muggle-born witch* is an appositive. It is nonessential, merely added information, so it is set apart with commas.

The following examples demonstrate how appositives rename or describe the nouns or noun phrases they follow.

1. Chandra Chauncy, **2015 Student of the Year**, received a $3,000 scholarship.
2. His aunt, **Senator Pelosi**, invited him to visit.
3. Machiavelli, **a failed Florentine civil servant**, wrote “The Prince,” **an acute and cynical analysis of power**, and numerous letters.
4. Senator Bob Kerrey, **a Vietnam War hero and Medal of Honor recipient**, often came across as a brooding figure. (Newsweek, March 2010)
5. The steely Hughes, arguably **the most influential White House aide of either gender**, is Bush’s alter ego. . . (Newsweek, March 2010)
6. The snake, **a low sneak**, hissed and struck. (E.B. White, in “The Second Tree from the Corner”)

Appositives are a mainstay of journalism because they help compact a great deal of information into as few words as possible. Without appositives, each of those sentences could be expressed either as

1. Two sentences:

   Chandra Chauncy is the **2016 Student of the Year**. She received a $3000 scholarship.

2. or with a subordinate clause, usually a *who* and a *to be* verb.

   His aunt, **who is Senator Pelosi**, invited him to visit.

(*Note:* Broadcast style often chooses one of these options. Appositives may pack too much information for a listener to process.)

But essential appositives are NOT set apart with commas. Your readers deserve to know when an appositive is important.

He is reading the Nebula Award-winning book “Ender’s Game.”

“Ender’s Game” is the essential appositive to *Nebula Award-winning book.* Without the appositive, the sentence becomes vague or inaccurate and therefore inappropriate for journalistic writing. *He is reading the Nebula Award-winning book.* (Nebula Awards have been given out annually since 1965, so the name of the book is important, even essential.)

Nonessential Phrases

Phrases are a group of words that do not contain both a subject and a verb. *Reading their books* is a gerund phrase. (*Reading* is a gerund and a noun, though it looks like a verb; therefore there is a subject in this phrase but no verb.)

The students, reading their books, were unaware that a gorilla had entered the room. All of the students were preoccupied with their studies.

But if only some students were reading and those were the ones who were unaware of the gorilla, then the phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence and is NOT set off with commas. *The students reading their books were unaware that a gorilla had entered the room until the other students’ shouts alerted them.*

Copyright Goodheart-Willcox Co., Inc. May not be posted to a publicly accessible website.

Nonessential Clauses

Clauses contain both a subject and a verb. (The subject may be a pronoun such as *that*, *which* or *who*.) If a clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence, it does NOT take commas.

The gravel road that leads to the nature preserve will be closed for two months.

But if a clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, commas set it off from the rest of the sentence.

Taylor Road, which leads to the nature preserve, will be closed for two months. The road has already been identified by name. The clause provides additional, but nonessential, information. You can delete the material between the commas and preserve the basic meaning of the sentence.

Note: If the clause is essential, use *that*. Use *which* when the clause is nonessential. If you are referring to a person or to an animal with a name, use *who* rather than *which* and indicate with commas whether or not the information is essential.

Try It!

Which sentences are incorrect? Edit them so that commas are used correctly.

1. The inspector I believe comes here every Tuesday.
2. My only sister, Emma, is graduating in May.
3. Sarah's brother, Jacob, was much taller than her five other brothers.
4. The man, who wears the yellow hat, is often accompanied by a small, inquisitive monkey.
5. Students who have completed Level 1 in high school can skip the introductory course.
6. The storm front which gathered strength over the Great Plains will arrive in our state tomorrow.
7. The dog that ate my homework also enjoys slippers.
9. I will of course make allowances for anyone who brings a signed letter from a physician.
10. He arrived at the party without his wife Sherrie. (He has only one wife.)

Copyright Goodheart-Willcox Co., Inc. May not be posted to a publicly accessible website.