

Functional Skills

English

Level 2 Writing W5a

Punctuate Written Text using Commas Accurately
v1.0

Functional Skills English:

Level 2

Skill Standard:

Writing W5a

Coverage and Range:

Accurately punctuate written text using commas.

‘This builds on the requirement for accuracy in the use of full stops, capital letters and question marks at previous levels, including correct use of standard punctuation.

‘A high level of accuracy is essential if the writing is to be functional – not only to be understood but presented in the most effective way with no negative impact on the outcome or reader.

‘Learners should understand how incorrect punctuation can alter the meaning and emphasis of written text and is likely to reduce both comprehension and interest.’¹

¹ QCA Functional Skills guidance: amplification of the standards June 2008 QCA/08/3700

Commas

When reading a text, either out loud or to yourself, you will undoubtedly pause at various points to take a breath, emphasise a point, ensure clarity or prevent confusion. Many, but by no means all, of these pauses or breaks can be marked with commas:

'Let's eat, grandma.' (As opposed to, *'Let's eat grandma!'*)

As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives...

Aside from marking simple pauses in sentences, though, commas can also be used for the following purposes:

- 1) to **separate clauses in complex sentences**;
- 2) before **coordinating conjunctions in compound sentences**;
- 3) after **transitional and introductory phrases**;
- 4) to **divide items in a list or series**;
- 5) to **off-set direct speech and quotations**;
- 6) to **bracket** parts of some sentences which provide **additional clarification**.
- 7) to **off-set references, pauses, shifts and contrasts at the ends of sentences**
- 8) to **off-set personal and geographic information**;
- 9) to **off-set names during direct address**.

Background

Sentences are separated into two parts: the *subject* and the *predicate*. The subject is the person or thing being written about (and their associated descriptors), whilst the predicate contains all the other information, e.g. what the subject is doing (the verb) and how/why/when/where they are doing it:

Subject [*Predicate*]

I [*do.*]

You [*are running.*]

The quick, brown fox [*jumped over the lazy dog.*]

The 09:15 express to Penzance [*has been delayed by a signal failure.*]

1) Separating Clauses in Complex Sentences

A clause is defined as a group of words that contains a subject and a verb.

A complex sentence consists of two parts: one which makes sense purely on its own and could be a full sentence if necessary (an independent clause) and another which is at least partially incomplete and which relies on the first in order for its full meaning to be made clear (a **dependent clause**). Commas are almost always used to separate these from each other.

I really enjoyed spectating today, especially as the weather was so nice.

When you are in Rome, you should do as the Romans do.

Evo Linden, the Dutchman who was injured earlier, retired from the race.

The only exceptions are those sentences where an independent clause is separated from a following **dependent clause** by what is known as a subordinating conjunction, e.g. *after, while, because, although*, etc. In these cases no comma is usually necessary.

I got the housework done while the baby slept.

I always go to Milan whenever I visit Italy.

I always feel excited at the start of a race, even when I'm not the favourite.

Exercise 1

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below. Some need multiples commas, others just one, and still more none at all.

- a) Please don't forget to bring the parcel as it needs to be posted today.
- b) The building which is the tallest in the county opens tomorrow.
- c) Though he wasn't a rich man Tom was still happy.
- d) Because I didn't read the instructions the flat-pack table that I built fell down.
- e) Thank you for the presents I received in the post.
- f) As she was so short Sarah found it hard to reach the higher shelves.
- g) After waiting for more than half an hour I walked out of the shop.
- h) The owners of the car park will not be held responsible for any damages.
- i) Although I enjoy sushi I cannot stand that particular restaurant.
- j) As time passes tastes change.

Exercise 1a

Now create your own complex sentences in which you use commas to separate the clauses. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

2) Before Coordinating Conjunctions in Compound Sentences

Coordinating conjunctions are words that can be used to join a pair of independent clauses (two groups of words that could each stand alone as complete sentences) in order to make a compound sentence. These seven words (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) are collectively known by the acronym *fanboys*. Not every use of a *fanboys* word needs a comma, as you should read the text to yourself to be clear. When it does, though, you should always remember to put it **before** the conjunction, not after it.

Independent Clause **Coordinating Conjunction** Independent Clause

I was very excited by the prospect of racing, **but** I was nervous nonetheless.

After we've finished I would like us all to have dinner together, **so** please bring your family round at 7pm.

The police repeatedly tried to clear the area, **yet** the protestors refused to move.

Exercise 2

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below. Some need one comma, but others don't need any at all. Be careful!

- a) The presentation is crucial to our success so you must deliver it flawlessly.
- b) I can't decide if I should fly to Newcastle or take the train.
- c) I can't be bothered to comply with your demands nor will I respond to further emails.
- d) It's about time we made some changes round here and I'm the man to do it.
- e) The food was good but I can't recommend the restaurant.
- f) And they call it puppy love.
- g) The crown should be mine for I am the rightful heir to the throne!
- h) The dam needs to be drained and it has to be done today.
- i) I have too many clothes yet I find shopping so addictive.
- j) I'm going to buy a chicken sandwich and a family-sized bag of crisps.

Exercise 2a

Now create your own compound sentences in which you use commas after the coordinating conjunctions. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

3) After Transitional and Introductory Phrases

These are words or phrases that are used to connect one point or idea to another. They are particularly useful in longer pieces of text in that they help the reader to travel (or *transit*) through your writing. Each should be followed by a comma when used at the start of a sentence, but be careful as some of the phrases can be quite lengthy and involve additional words other than the **transition** itself:

While I was asleep, I dreamed that I won the lottery.

When the weather brightens up, shall we go walking?

To be honest, I don't think we should go sailing.

Secondly, I think that the wallpaper is ghastly.

In spite of this, the truth will eventually come out.

Yes, you can go out.

After this, why don't we all go for a meal?

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.

These words and phrases are typically used to cover four main areas of transition:

Type of Transition	Example Words
Addition & Similarity	furthermore typically for example with regard to this
Cause & Effect	consequently therefore in that case otherwise
Contradiction & Concession	however either way in contrast instead
Sequencing	initially subsequently thirdly in conclusion

Some simpler **transitional words and phrases** are demonstrated in the text below:

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you to state my dissatisfaction with my treatment at the hands of the staff from your Mansfield branch.

First, your counter clerk managed to put my transaction through twice, which caused me to be repeatedly billed for the same item.

Secondly, the delivery itself not only arrived at the wrong time, but also on the wrong day. **Furthermore**, the attitude of your delivery drivers was very poor. **For example**, neither of them rang the bell to let me know that they were there. **Instead**, they simply abandoned the fridge on my driveway in the midst of a heavy downpour. **As a result**, I got to the door only in time to see them hop into the cab and drive away. **Consequently**, due to its having been sat in the rain, the box turned into a soggy mess and allowed water to seep into the fridge's motor.

In conclusion, I am demanding a full refund for this simply awful service.

3a) However...

Care should be taking when using the word **however** as a transitional phrase. You should only use a comma after it when it is being used to mean 'on the other hand' or 'by contrast', e.g.

However, the choice is yours as to which room you'd like.

Research shows, however, that the berries are very good for you.

You should not, though, insert a comma after *however* when it is simply being used to mean 'in whatever way', e.g.

However you feel about it, at the end of the day it's not our choice.

Exercise 3

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below.

- a) Conversely I feel that the final decision was correct.
- b) We had wanted to leave at 7pm. However Ben was delayed at the station.
- c) On the other hand what did we buy it for in the first place?
- d) Archery takes a long time to master. In a similar way so does playing the piano.
- e) However it must be used with care.
- f) In summary the prosecution believes the defendant to be guilty.
- g) Fifthly I must add that all the blame lies with Tom and his attitude.
- h) In contrast the butterflies of Brazil are very brightly coloured.
- i) Suddenly the ball was hoofed down the ground and bounced into the goal.
- j) As a result I now know a lot about commas.

Exercise 3a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas after the transitional words and phrases. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

4) Dividing Items in a List or Series

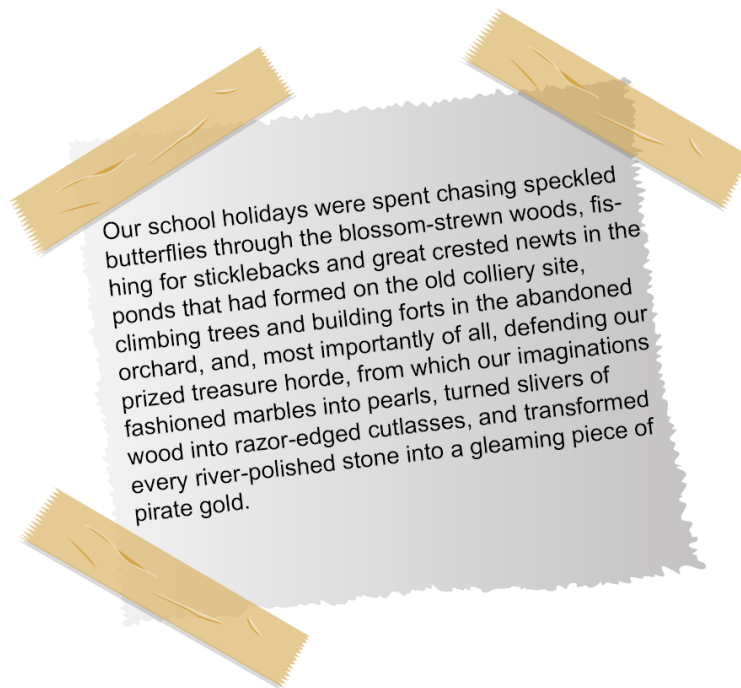
In simple lists of three or more words, phrases or clauses, you should typically place a comma *after* all but the penultimate (next to last) and final items.

For my maths exam I will need my scientific calculator, geometry set and lucky pen.

The manager said he would raise wages, reduce hours and introduce a bonus.

Red, white and blue are the colours of the Australian flag.

However, if the items in the list are themselves ambiguous, wordy, and/or if final part of the sentence is itself long or complicated, it is acceptable to put a comma (known as an *Oxford comma*) at the end of the item before the final ‘and’:



In the above example, the Oxford comma is before *and* in line six. The comma after *and* in that line is merely a pause.

Besides helping with a text’s flow, Oxford commas are particularly useful for avoiding confusion. Take this example:

We invited the twins, Mary-Kate and Ashley.

From this we aren’t wholly sure if *the twins* are *Mary-Kate* and *Ashley*, or if they are different people entirely. The use of an Oxford comma, though, clarifies matters:

We invited the twins, Mary-Kate, and Ashley.

There are now clearly three invitees: the twins (whatever their names might be) *and* Mary-Kate *and* Ashley.

For lists of **adjectives**, e.g. the **short, brown, wiry** dog, there are no strict rules as such, merely suggestions. In lists as short as two adjectives, sometimes it is appropriate to use a comma and at other times not:

*The **dark, stormy** waters lashed at the boat.*

*The **dark and stormy** waters lashed at the boat.*

One rule-of-thumb is to ask yourself two questions:

If I reverse the order of the adjectives, does the sentence still make sense?

*Would the sentence still make sense if the comma(s) were substituted with '**and**'?*

If you can answer **yes** to **both** of these, then commas are appropriate, e.g.

*I own a **large wooden** cabin in the forest.*

*He was a **strong, experienced** swimmer.*

In the first example it would seem odd to say either 'wooden large cabin' or 'large and wooden cabin', so we can justifiably leave the comma out. In the second, though, we could comfortably use 'experienced **and** strong' or 'an experienced, strong swimmer', so we keep the comma in.

Exercise 4

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below. Some need multiples commas, others just one, and still more none at all.

- a) I need your helmet your shoes and your motorcycle.
- b) Stir together the yoghurt parmesan and ground black pepper until they're well mixed.
- c) Ian, do you not think this plan is crazy bananas and totally nuts?
- d) Samuel strode forward leaping up the rickety wooden stairs two at a time.
- e) This is a shampoo designed to minimise tangles and prevent breakage.
- f) The meteorite was a small fragment from a much larger nickel-iron asteroid.
- g) My favourite types of music include punk heavy metal and pop rock.
- h) They're a new kind of sweet made from lactose corn syrup and flavouring.
- i) This train will call at Barnstaple Bideford Yelland and Falmouth.
- j) The ground shook so hard that we fell to our knees the sky instantly became a jet black sheet and then the air was pressed from our lungs as choking clouds of sooty dust fell upon us like a rampaging horde. Grasping and wild-eyed, we deperately fough to increase the distance between us and the volcano.

Exercise 4a

Now create your own lists or series in which you use commas to separate the items. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

5) Off-setting Direct Speech and Quotations

When you want to inform a reader of the precise words that someone else has said, you need to put them in speech marks. Unless the speech comes right at the start of a sentence, in order to introduce it you will need to include a comma **before** the quote. Furthermore, unless there is a natural exclamation or question mark at the end of the quote itself, you will also need a second comma to show where it finishes.

Comma to introduce speech:

The MP was heard to say, 'I don't believe she got the job over me!'

'Stick a fork in me,' I said, 'I'm done.'

Comma to open speech and another to close it:

I said, 'I'm leaving,' as I walked off the set.

When speech starts the sentence and finishes with a natural exclamation or question mark, no commas are needed:

'Don't you think you ought to apologise?' said Mary.

'Fire!' shouted the woman as she ran out the shop.

As you can see, in these instances the punctuation mark at the end of the speech always goes **inside** the closing speech mark.

Exercise 5

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below.

- a) I told the researcher 'I can believe it's not butter'.
- b) 'When will I be famous?' I wondered aloud to myself.
- c) She and I argued so much. 'Please' I said 'just stop moaning.'
- d) 'Our users will get access to offers they can't get anywhere else' a spokesman said.
- e) I heard the man shout 'Look out! That bus has no brakes!'
- f) Mr Weldon was quoted as saying that he had 'no plans to stand for parliament.'
- g) 'I have no plans to stand for parliament' said Mr Weldon.
- h) I stood up and laughed. I replied 'I don't believe you.'
- i) 'You're breaking up' I growled. 'The signal round here' Eve remarked 'is just awful.'
- j) 'Here comes the sun' sang the singer on stage six.

Exercise 5a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas to off-set direct speech and/or quotations. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

6) Bracketing Commas

Non-essential words, phrases or clauses which appear in the middle of otherwise complete sentences should be bracketed by a pair of commas – one before and one afterwards. One good clue as to their correct positions is that if the extra word, phrase or clause were to be removed, the remaining words would still form a proper sentence:

Word: My mother-in-law, Sue, is a fantastic cook.

Phrase: The vet said that the dog, a scruffy Alsatian, would be fine.

Clause: Why was it, she wondered, that he was never, ever on time?

Note: The difference between a phrase and a clause is that the former will not include a subject performing a verb, whereas the latter will. Remember, too, that **essential** words, phrases or clauses should not be bracketed with commas in this way:

That man in the green jacket is the one who did it!

Exercise 6

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below. Whilst some will need two commas, others won't require any at all.

- Why I often ask myself am I so talented?
- Who do you suppose she asked with a faint smile did steal the diamond?
- Rick his brow a knot of tension raced towards the plane as it touched down.
- The two cousins respectively aged eight and ten laughed joyfully as they played outside.
- The lead actress, whilst graciously receiving the applause, found herself deluged in bouquets of flowers.
- The red box in the boot of the car contains the fire extinguisher.
- Mr Torrence the caretaker has worked for the Overlook Hotel for many, many years.
- Resistance apparently is futile according to the aliens.
- The soup which was a speciality of the restaurant was delicious.
- That day at the beach was the best I had during the whole fortnight's holiday.

Exercise 6a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas to bracket non-essential information. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

7) Off-setting References, Pauses, Shifts and Contrasts at the Ends of Sentences

When a word, phrase or clause creates a pronounced pause, shift or contrast at the end of a sentence, or refers back to an earlier part of it (free modifiers), it should be off-set with a preceding comma:

The food's not inedible, merely unpleasant.

The music was exquisite, practically divine.

My favourite class is English, not maths.

There's Usain Bolt, the fastest man ever.

Harry shovelled doughnuts into his mouth, chewing manically.

Fireworks screamed into the air, exploding to cheers of delight.

The bulrushes shivered in the brisk north wind, their brown heads nodding.

Note: Referential clauses typically appear at the ends of sentences, but they can be used elsewhere, too:

Groaning and creaking, the ship lay at anchor in the bay.

When using commas in this way you must also be careful not to inadvertently create comma splices, whereby a comma is erroneously used to join two independent clauses together.

Exercise 7

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below.

- a) The marching band took the field their instruments gleaming in the sun.
- b) Cars and vans lay abandoned in the yard thickly overgrown with weeds.
- c) Shanghai's port is enormous the biggest in the world.
- d) The pulled pork was a gem delivering a burst of flavour on the tongue.
- e) She ran through the valley her flowing hair trailing in the breeze.
- f) The guards stood to attention ready and willing.
- g) Jim absently chewed on his nails his thoughts fixed on the exam.
- h) The boy stood on the burning deck a pocket full of crackers.
- i) The car came to a halt tyres smoking and brakes squealing.
- j) The king leapt from his throne howling with fury at his courtiers.

Exercise 7a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas to off-set references, pauses, shifts and contrasts at the ends of sentences. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

8) Off-setting Personal and Geographic Information

Commas should be used to off-set letters and titles which follow people's names:

Sir George Andreou, VC, KCMG

Prof Ian Lilliman, FRCS

Andy Craske, Ph.D

They should also feature in month/date formats:

Month/date: I was born on May 17th, 1980.

Month/date/year: I was born on May 17th, 1980, in Nottingham.

Day/month/date/year: I was born on Saturday, May 17th, 1980, in Nottingham.

But not in date/month or month/year:

Date/month/year: I was born on 17th May 1980.

Month/year: I was born in May 1980.

And in addresses (except between the house number and street):

Mr Sherlock Holmes, 221b Baker Street, Marylebone, London, NW1 6XE.

251 North Bristol Avenue, Brentwood, California, USA.

If found, please return to: 23 Meteor Street, Tufnell Park, London, England.

Note: in Australian and American addresses, the post or *zip* code is typically paired with the state name, hence no comma goes between them, e.g. *Yellowstone National Park, PO Box 168, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming 82190-0168, USA.*

Exercise 8

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below.

- The Prime Minister's official residence is 10 Downing Street London SW1A 2AA.
- The Taj Mahal is in Agra India.
- The statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid is in Copenhagen Denmark.
- Aurochs, an extinct type of cattle, are shown in the cave paintings at Lascaux France.
- Father Christmas's address is Santa's Grotto Reindeerland XM4 5HQ.
- The Bastille was stormed on 14th July 1789.
- Sydney Opera House Bennelong Point Sydney New South Wales 2000 Australia.
- British Antarctic Survey Stanley Falkland Islands South Atlantic FIQQ 1ZZ.
- bksb Ltd i2 Centre Hamilton Court Hamilton Way Mansfield Notts. NG18 5FB.
- Flight Engineer Don Pettit Node 2 Deck 5 International Space Station Low Earth Orbit.

Exercise 8a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas to off-set personal and/or geographic information. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.

9) Direct Address

Commas should be used to off-set people's names and titles during direct address (when that person is being spoken to directly). When the name comes at the start, follow it with a comma; when it's at the end, precede it with a comma; and when it's in the middle, use both:

Lisa, please would you see me after class?

Thank you so much for your support, Mary.

Thank you, Sir Ian, for your support.

Remember that no such commas are necessary during indirect address.

Exercise 9

To test your understanding, insert commas into appropriate places in the sentences below. Some need commas adding but other do not.

- a) Aaron will you take the bins out, please?
- b) I thought your performance on stage was tremendous Susan.
- c) Lucas what's your best time for the 100m?
- d) Sir Martin would you do the honours?
- e) I would like to congratulate you Professor Hugo for your lifelong work.
- f) Walter took first place for having grown the largest marrow.
- g) I'm going to town this afternoon with Tim. Rob are you coming?
- h) Look out for that low bridge Scott!
- i) Please would you ask Jane what she's doing for lunch Sarah?
- j) I'd say that model car racing is Dillon's favourite hobby. Do you agree?

Exercise 9a

Now create your own sentences in which you use commas to off-set names during direct address. Have your tutor mark them when you are finished.
