

When to Use Periods and Commas

Knowing whether to use a period or comma can be complex. Understanding some basic rules can help you in improving your writing. Of course, there are also other punctuation marks used when writing, but understanding the concepts expressed in this handout is a good starting point.

What is a Sentence? When do I use a Period?

A sentence is a complete thought, with at least two parts: a subject and at least one verb. (Many sentences have two or more verbs.) A period (also sometimes called a “full stop”) is used to tell the reader when the sentence ends.

The subject is a noun; it is what the sentence is about. The verb is an action word.

A sentence can be short or long and still be grammatically correct. Here are two complete sentences, with the subject underlined and the verb(s) *italicized*.

He *runs*.

Every day after school, Anais *goes* home, *feeds* her dogs, and *studies* for her classes.

When do I use a Comma?

A comma is used in places where there is not a complete sentence, but a pause would be required in natural speech. If you are unsure whether a comma is necessary, read your sentence out loud, both with and without a pause; if the pause sounds correct, you probably need a comma in that place!

Leaving out a necessary comma can significantly change the meaning of the sentence. Let's look at this classic example:

We are ready to *eat*, Grandma!

We are ready to *eat* Grandma!

The first sentence lets your grandmother know that you are ready to sit down for your meal, whereas the second tells someone else that you are ready to devour your favorite relative!



When to Use Periods and Commas

Let's take a look at an example of how periods are often used in place of commas:

Although I am very hungry. I cannot eat until I get off work.

In this example, "Although I am very hungry" is *not* a complete sentence – it cannot make sense by itself. It *does* have both a subject ("I") and a verb ("am"), but the word "although" makes the reader expect more information. Therefore, we need to use a comma instead of a period:

Although I am very hungry, I cannot eat until I get off work.

Commas are also needed in lists. Let's look at an example without commas:

Please go to the store and buy lettuce beans bell peppers and carrots.

This is very overwhelming, and may even confuse the reader. (Is there such a thing as "lettuce beans"?) Using commas makes this much clearer:

Please go to the-store and buy lettuce, beans, bell peppers, and carrots.

Putting it all Together

Here is a brief passage showing the usage of periods and commas:

Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is, in my opinion, a useful system. BART runs trains in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties. Although trains do not operate around the clock, BART has the advantage of providing service frequently throughout the day. Unlike Caltrain, ACE, and Amtrak, BART runs trains every 15 minutes during most of the day, and every 20 minutes at night. AC Transit, a bus system that complements BART, offers service to many BART stations.

References -

This handout was adapted from "Comma Rules" from Valle Verde Writing Center at El Paso Community College.



(510) 885-3674
www.csueastbay.edu/scaa
scaa@csueastbay.edu