



Test...Reflect...Adjust...Repeat

3RPrep

Comma

Worksheets

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Commas: Joining and Separating Sentences

Compound sentences often use commas in combining ideas. Two sentences, if looked at as **independent clauses** (subject + predicate), can be easily combined by replacing the period between them with a **comma and part of 'FANBOYS,'** also called a **coordinating conjunction**. While not every **FANBOYS** word is appropriate for every situation, it is easy to notice that if you see **a comma followed by *and, but, or another FANBOYS* word** it is a grammatically sound way to conjoin sentences.

Examples:

Jack was fast, and Jill was confident.

I knew he was lying, yet he spoke convincingly.

Most cats are friendly, so I'm not afraid of being scratched.

He wasn't alone, but he felt isolated.

Notice how each half of the sentence, without the underlined portion, can be its own sentence. This is because they are both **independent clauses**. This is useful to recognize because it can solve questions *in reverse* as well. You know not only how to combine simple sentences, but how to **identify compound sentences** and break them up into parts accordingly.

Example Questions:

1.

I like listening to music. I don't watch TV much.

How would you best combine these sentences?

- A.** I like listening to music, I don't watch TV much.
- B.** I like listening to music but I don't watch TV much.
- C.** I like listening to music and I don't watch TV much.
- D.** I like listening to music, but I don't watch TV much.

If you immediately notice that **B** and **C** do not have commas, you can rule them out immediately. Looking at **A** and **D**, you can see that **A** does not use **FANBOYS**. While other words could replace *but* in answer **D**, because it is multiple choice we can determine that it is the only correct answer.

2.

Mary wasn't the best at her job, but she liked her work.

Which is the best replacement for the underlined portion?

- A. job. But she
- B. job. She
- C. job but she
- D. job, so she

NOTE: The sentence as provided is grammatically correct. However, as we are not given the option to leave it unchanged, we must observe the prompt to find the best replacement, even if unnecessary.

This question is a little trickier, but some answers are quickly ruled out. **A** cannot be correct because it separates the sentence back into **independent clauses** but keeps the **coordinating conjunction** 'but.' If you were going to revert the clauses to separate sentences, **the conjunction must go with the comma**. We can also quickly rule out **C** because it removes the comma, which we know must come before the **FANBOYS** word. Looking now only at **B** and **D**, we must choose which is the best replacement. **D** is very similar to the original, but the word *so* greatly changes the meaning of the sentence. Because we do not want to change the meaning, we can determine that **B** is correct.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A. time. And both
- B. time and both
- C. time, yet both
- D. time. Yet both

How do you answer a question without seeing it? Look at the answers, and you will notice that **only one is grammatically correct**. We know to look for a **comma + FANBOYS**. Three of these answers have only one or the other. **A** and **D** have conjunctions, but incorrectly place a period before them. **B** lacks any type of punctuation, which is never correct in joining sentences (which, as the other answers demonstrate, must be what we are trying to do). Only option **C** can be correct.

Commas: Multiple Adjectives

When multiple adjectives are used in succession, sometimes one or more commas are needed. This is not true for all cases, though, so it's important to learn the rules of using commas with multiple adjectives. **When the order of the adjectives doesn't matter, a comma is needed.** Therefore, you must know when order matters; for the most part, this is a skill you acquire from being a native English speaker.

Adjectives can't be thrown together in any order. **Adjective hierarchy**, the order in which you must place adjectives, is a complex topic which still undergoes research and debate. While the order of the hierarchy is uncertain, know that in general it applies adjectives connoting **quality, size, color, origin, material, and purpose**. What does this mean? Well, look at some of the examples below and see how most the adjectives (those falling into the categories above) just wouldn't sound right in any other order.

Examples:

Tom showed me his new red Italian sports car.

It was the biggest, meanest, fastest car on the block.

In our rich little town, that was saying something.

Wealthy, tall, proud Tom couldn't be happier.

See how you can rearrange the adjectives with commas and they still make sense? One could still say, *'Tall, proud, wealthy Tom,'* but it would sound awfully wrong to say, *'Italian red new sports car.'* So, when presented with a question combining multiple adjectives, the first thing to do is rearrange them and see if they still make sense. **If they make sense in any order, use commas like a list. If they have a set order, no commas are needed.**

Example Questions:

1.

A big old orange tabby cat was found near my house yesterday.

Which change, if any, should be made to the underlined portion?

- A. big, old, orange tabby cat
- B. big, old, orange, tabby cat
- C. big old orange, tabby cat
- D. NO CHANGE

Step one: rearrange the adjectives. Does “orange old tabby big cat,” sound correct? Of course not. Therefore, we can immediately rule out **every answer** adding one or more commas. The sentence is correct as-is, so the answer is **D**, no change.

2.

Wise weathered men offer profound advice.

What is the best way to rewrite this sentence?

- A.** Weathered wise men offer profound advice.
- B.** Wise, weathered men offer profound advice.
- C.** Wise, weathered, men offer profound advice.
- D.** Wise, weathered men offer profound, advice.

You know the drill: rearrange the adjectives. Can ‘weathered’ and ‘wise’ be switched? Yes! In that case, we need a comma between them. Although **A** flips them just like we did, there is no comma. **C** has a comma between them, but has an extraneous comma after ‘weathered.’ **B** and **D** are similar, but **D** incorrectly puts a comma before ‘advice.’ The correct answer is **B**.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A.** old German children’s game
- B.** German old children’s game
- C.** old, German, children’s game
- D.** German, old, children’s game

Which way, if either, around sounds more correct, ‘*old German children’s*,’ or ‘*German old children’s*?’ It should immediately strike you that the former makes more sense. This immediately rules out the two options using the other ordering. As we’ve determined **order does matter**, we know **we do not need commas**. Therefore, the correct answer is **A**, which uses the correct order without commas.

Commas: Lists

Lists are full of commas, so it is important to know which ones you need, where to place them, and why. For these purposes, a list must be made up of **three or more items**. There should be a comma after every item, **which is sometimes more than one word**. You have probably heard of the **Oxford Comma**; it is notorious for being debated by grammar scholars. The Oxford Comma (or Series Comma) is the comma **before the final object in a list of 3 or more**, and on the ACT it is **required**. A rule of thumb to remember: there should be **one fewer comma than item in the list**. Be careful, however, as commas which are *not* part of the list should not be counted.

Examples:

The shopping list included carrots, bread, cheese, and milk.

Tom, Kyra, and Dorian would all go to the store.

They could drive, walk, or take a bus.

They could not agree, so they talked, debated, and eventually decided.

See how for both lists, regardless of their part of the speech, there is a comma after **each item**. It is important to remember that there is **no comma before the first item**. This is a common mistake on the ACT, and an easily avoided one. List articles are not always short; in fact, the ACT often uses lists made up of long items so they do not *look* like lists. Don't be fooled: each article can be of any length, and short and long can be used together.

Example Questions:

1.

Meg bought a pet rabbit from a stranger online, named him Soup and set up a cage for him under her bed.

How would you correctly rewrite this sentence?

- A. Meg bought a pet rabbit, from a stranger online, named him Soup and set up a cage for him, under her bed.
- B. Meg bought a pet rabbit from a stranger, online, named him Soup, and set up a cage for him under her bed.
- C. Meg bought a pet rabbit from a stranger online, named him Soup, and set up a cage for him under her bed.
- D. Meg, bought a pet rabbit from a stranger online, named him Soup, and set up a cage for him under her bed.

Don't be thrown by the long phrases making up this list. Instead, break it down into its essential elements. What are the actions being listed? Identify them and separate them with commas. If you notice the comma incorrectly placed before the list in **D** you can immediately rule it out. In **A**, there is a comma separating 'from a stranger online,' which is not its own object in the list, so it **cannot** be correct. It also incorrectly omits the final **Oxford Comma**. **B** makes a similar mistake by separating 'online,' which is part of the first item in the list. Only **C** correctly groups the items and has the **two necessary commas**.

2.

Tired and hungry, Peyton knew it was best just to stop, relax and breathe, deeply, while she calmed down.

What is the best change to make to the underlined portion?

- A. stop, relax and breathe deeply**
- B. stop, relax, and breathe deeply,**
- C. stop, relax, and breathe deeply**
- D. NO CHANGE**

This type of question is common on the ACT. Remember to focus on the **underlined portion**, even if there is a comma at the beginning—it is most likely there just to confuse you. It is usually wise to first check answer **D**, as often “no change” answers are correct. In this case, however, the comma after 'breathe' should be instead after 'and,' so it is incorrect. Option **A** lacks the necessary **Oxford Comma**. Between options **B** and **C**, the only difference is the final comma. Remember that the last comma comes before the **penultimate** item in the list, **NOT** the last, so option **B** is incorrect. The correct answer is **C**.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A. Gabi and Riley stayed in town for the summer, hung out with friends, played video games.**
- B. Gabi and Riley stayed in town for the summer, hung out with friends and played video games.**
- C. Gabi and Riley stayed in town, for the summer, hung out with friends, and played video games.**
- D. Gabi and Riley stayed in town for the summer, hung out with friends, and played video games.**

These answers are very similar, which makes it a little confusing to look at. However, it actually makes it easier to answer because we know that only one can be correct. What makes each answer different from the others? **A** omits 'and,' which is necessary before the final object in

the list. **B** includes 'and,' but leaves out the necessary **Oxford Comma**. **C** is the only option with a comma after 'town,' which incorrectly separates 'for the summer' from the rest of its phrase. **D** is correct, with the appropriate two commas for the three items in this list.

Commas: Non-Essential Clause

Often sentences contain **non-essential clauses**, clauses which are not grammatically necessary to the sentence, nested between two commas. In the last sentence, the phrase *‘clauses . . . sentence’* is non-essential. It provides **extra information** and is placed in an existing sentence rather than given its own. Sometimes **transitions** are moved from the beginning of the sentence to the middle and punctuated as **non-essential clauses**. These clauses overall are fairly simple on their own, but can become quite confusing when paired with complex sentences. If the **non-essential clause** itself is long or complex, it can become further complicated.

Examples:

It was, **without question**, the most awful smell to ever reach my nose.

This is, **as mentioned**, the most important step.

Elle, **the first of many new acquaintances**, left a lasting impression on what was, **ultimately**, the most easily influenced aspect of Daryl’s psyche.

His father, **a shoemaker for the late king, who died years before Bradley’s birth**, felt an inexplicable bond of duty to the crown.

The first two sentences should seem very natural. Phrases like those are very common, especially in spoken English. The third is more complicated, as it has **two non-essential clauses**. The fourth is even more confusing, utilizing **two combined non-essential clauses**. The important thing when analyzing sentences with non-essential clauses is to **find the essential clauses**, because with them you can determine which clauses are *not* essential and punctuate them accordingly.

In the third example, the *essential* sentence is “*Elle left a lasting impression on what was the most easily influenced aspect of Daryl’s psyche.*” **Non-essential clauses must have a comma on both sides** to separate them from the essential, so we know that the other parts of the sentence must have those commas.

The same is true for the fourth example, although it is more complicated. The **essential sentence** is “*His father felt an inexplicable bond of duty to the crown.*” The comma within the clause is necessary to show that the king died, not the father, and creates a **complex non-essential clause**.

Example Questions:

1.

Marissa valued her musical ability greatly. She was a jazz trombonist.

How would you best combine these sentences?

- A. Marissa, who was a jazz trombonist, valued her musical ability greatly.
- B. A jazz trombonist Marissa, valued her musical ability greatly.
- C. Marissa, a jazz trombonist, valued her musical ability greatly.
- D. Marissa, a jazz trombonist valued her musical ability greatly.

We are looking for the most grammatically correct, concise way to combine these sentences without changing the meaning. Option **B** should be easily ruled out, as it does not look or sound remotely correct with only the existing comma. Option **D** is clearly missing the second comma to correctly nest the **non-essential clause**. Between options **A** and **C**, both of which are grammatically correct, the best choice is **C** because it is more **concise**.

2.

Anya was worried, though not afraid, necessarily, that her friend's warning, however unclear, was right.

How could this sentence best be changed?

- A. Anya was worried, though not afraid necessarily, that her friend's warning, however unclear, was right.
- B. Anya was worried, though not afraid, necessarily, however unclear, that her friend's warning was right.
- C. Anya was worried, necessarily, that her friend's warning was right, however unclear.
- D. **NO CHANGE**

This sentence is a bit of a mess, with numerous **non-essential clauses** making it hard to decipher. To begin, determine the **essential sentence**. You can reduce the sentence to just "*Anya was worried that her friend's warning was right.*" If you do, you can determine where commas are needed by making sure the rest of the clauses have commas on either side. **A** is a tempting answer, but the omitted comma changes the meaning of the clause from saying that she was "not necessarily afraid" to that she *was* afraid, but that it was unnecessary. This subtle difference changes the meaning of the sentence, so this option cannot be correct. Option **B** has commas around all the extra clauses, but by moving the third forward it also changes the meaning of the sentence, with the clarity of her friend's warning no longer being stressed but instead some other unclear aspect. **C** needlessly omits an entire clause, and in doing so changes the sentence's meaning. It is actually correct to choose **D**, no change, for this question.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A. **This, then, was the cause**
- B. **This then, was the cause**
- C. **This was, then the cause**
- D. **This was then the cause**

Recall the rule mentioned before about moving **transitions** into the sentence as **non-essential clauses**. Only **A** correctly offers a comma on each side of 'then,' the clause in question. Although we cannot see the full sentence or the question, we can tell that this is the beginning of a sentence due to the capitalized '*This*,' and can assume we are working with a transition, especially because '*This*' implies an antecedent somewhere preceding it.

Commas: 'Trick' Extra Commas

The ACT is full of questions that throw in one or more answers just to trick you. Often, these are answers with commas in places that *look* right, or omitted commas in places where they *don't* look right. It is important not to be overwhelmed by commas, and to recognize them as necessary or unnecessary without spending too much time.

If you know all or most of your comma rules, this is a straightforward process: look at a comma and determine *which* rule puts it there. If you don't know your rules, or aren't confident in your knowledge, it takes some reverse problem solving. You should try and learn at least the **Where NOT to Put Commas** lesson, as it will help rule out lots of common 'trick' answers.

Tips:

- Don't be overwhelmed by sentences with lots of commas. Calmly look at each comma and determine if it belongs.
- Be careful around **lists**. **Lists** often have lots of commas close together, so make sure there are no extras thrown in.
- Learn and look for words commonly paired with commas (**FANBOYS**, **transition words**, etc.)
- Identify **clauses** in the sentence. Separate **essential** and **non-essential** appropriately.
- Use your ear! Often, reading a sentence aloud/in your head will help learn where **natural pauses** occur. Just don't let this work against you, as sometimes spoken English doesn't quite line up with written.

The above tips do not cover every situation, so be sure to approach each question carefully and analytically; these are just some common situations and reliable points for which to stay on the lookout.

Example Questions:

1.

This was, for Josie, the first of many tedious, arduous, and necessary, trials.

A B C D E

Which comma, if any, should be omitted?

This question is not exactly like an ACT question, as there are more answers available. Regardless, the many commas make for a strong example. The sentence contains five

commas, which can be split into two sets based on the rule: the first two surround a **non-essential clause**, and the last three are in a **list**. Separating comma sets according their rules can make an overwhelming sentence must simpler. The **non-essential clause** is appropriately surrounded with two commas, so we can leave them as is. The **list**, however, has three items; thus, it should only need two commas. Comma **E** is incorrect.

2.

Furthermore, this was not the only obstacle, and it was certainly not the most difficult.

How could this sentence best be rewritten?

- A. Furthermore, it was certainly not the most difficult, and this was not the only obstacle.
- B. Furthermore, this was not the only obstacle and it was certainly not the most difficult.
- C. Furthermore this was not the only obstacle, and it was certainly not the most difficult.
- D. **NO CHANGE**

Sometimes a sentence can be difficult to dissect just because it is a bad sentence. Despite the wonky arrangement, this sentence is actually correct as-is; it has a comma after the **transition word** and before the **FANBOYS conjunction**. Rearranging it in option **A** only makes it more confusing, and the other options only omit necessary commas. Option **D**, no change, is correct.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A. out of Washington, D.C., and again for the finale.
- B. out of Washington D.C., and again for the finale.
- C. out of Washington, D.C. and again for the finale.
- D. out of Washington, D. C., and again for, the finale.

We are only given the end of a sentence, but with our comma rules we can determine the best answer. It is important to know for this question that there *must* be a comma after 'Washington.' **When naming a city, in any context, there is always a comma before its respective state/province.** With this in mind, option **C** surely looks tempting because it doesn't have a period right before a comma. However, despite this jarring placement, it is in fact correct to have a period and comma together. There must be a comma before the **FANBOYS conjunction** *and* to finish this **compound sentence** correctly. The remaining choices are **A** and **D**. The comma after 'for' is unnecessary and incorrect, so the correct answer is **A**.

Commas: Where NOT to Use

Commas are used in many ways, so it can be confusing when you see a comma that looks convincing but doesn't fit a rule you know. In these cases, it helps if you can **rule out** answers by knowing where commas **don't** belong. Keep some of these rules under your belt, and you should be able to rule out one or more answer choices in **every question about commas**.

Commas DO NOT belong:

- **Between subject and verb:** Commas are for separating thoughts, so don't put one in the middle of a complete thought.

Example: That silly Harper, missed out big time.

- **Before/after a preposition:** These may seem correct because they are often at the beginning of phrases, but prepositions and commas do *not* go together. The rare exception is when the preposition begins a **non-restrictive clause**.

Example: I left my book upon, the kitchen counter.

- **Around an emphatic pronoun:** Emphatic pronouns (like *myself*, *himself*, etc.) right after a noun should *not* be between commas.

Example: The King of Rock n' Roll, himself, would head the stage.

These three situations cover most of the answers on the ACT that aren't covered by the rules of where commas *do* belong. In some example questions below, use these rules to eliminate answers.

Example Questions:

1.

The constituents themselves, for whom much was at stake, cast their ballots carefully.

What change, if any, should be made to this sentence?

- A. Remove the first comma
- B. Remove the second comma
- C. Add a comma after '*constituents*'
- D. **NO CHANGE**

Look at each answer choice and see if any of the new rules apply. Option **A** is tempting, because we have an **emphatic pronoun** and a **preposition** right next to each other! However, if you look a little closer, you will see this is one of our exceptions for the pronoun rule, as we have the **non-restrictive clause** ‘for whom much was at stake’ which *must* be between two commas. This also rules out option **B**. Option **C** may be confusing if you get the rule about **emphatic pronouns** backwards, but remember that they are *not* supposed to be between two commas! The correct answer is **D**, no change. If you got this correct first try, pat yourself on the back!

2.

Driving all day long, thoroughly tired Grace out.

How should this sentence best be rewritten?

- A. Driving, all day long, thoroughly tired Grace out.
- B. Driving all day long thoroughly tired Grace out.
- C. Driving all day long. Thoroughly tired Grace out.
- D. Driving all day long thoroughly tired, Grace, out.

This sentence, as written in the question, breaks the first rule of where commas do not belong; **it separates the subject and verb**. While it may look like an **introductory clause**, it actually begins with the **subject**. The gerund ‘driving’ is the **subject**, as it is what is doing the tiring. For it to be correct, it would need no commas at all. This is option **B**, the correct answer. The others only offer more unnecessary commas.

3.

Choose the correct answer without seeing the question.

- A. Raccoons ran everywhere, around them.
- B. Raccoons ran, everywhere around them.
- C. Raccoons, ran everywhere around them.
- D. Raccoons ran everywhere around them.

Without seeing the question, we know that we are looking for the one sentence here which is grammatically correct. Can we rule answers out by knowing where commas do not belong? Option **A** has a comma before the **preposition** ‘around,’ so it is incorrect. Option **C** separates the **subject** and **verb**, so it can also be eliminated. Option **B** offers a comma which may sound plausible, but which incorrectly leaves an incomplete phrase after it. Option **D**, with no commas at all, is correct.

