

Using Commas After Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Certain words, phrases, and clauses that come at the beginning of a sentence are almost always set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma. The comma tells readers where to pause for a moment to avoid confusion of meaning. The comma also indicates to the reader that the introductory part of the sentence is finished and the main part of the sentence (independent/main clause) is about to begin.

Correct comma usage:

After the rain stopped, thunder could be heard in the distance.

No comma:

After the rain stopped thunder could be heard in the distance.

A sentence pattern or frame can provide a visual scaffold to help students imitate and write sentences that begin with introductory word(s), phrases, or clauses.

	,		.
Introductory word(s), phrase, or clause		independent clause.	

Examples of Comma Usage With Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Note: This section includes some common examples that signal to a writer that a comma is usually needed after an introductory element. These examples are based on the ELAR TEKS for grades 6–8. This section does not represent all of the different types of introductory words, phrases, or clauses that may be included in your grade-level curricula materials.

Words, phrases, and clauses that function as adverbs are the most common type of introductory word groups used by writers. They usually tell when, where, how, why, or under what circumstances the action of the sentence occurs. The following examples include introductory word groups that function as adverbs as well as other parts of speech.

Introductory Words

Words such as adverbs or transitions are often used at the beginning of sentences to “link sentences and paragraphs together smoothly so there are no abrupt jumps or breaks between ideas” (ELAR TEKS Glossary, p. 28).

meanwhile, afterward, later, first, finally, generally, still, however, yet, next, furthermore, basically, yes, no, well, actually, eventually, now

Comma Usage with Introductory Word(s)

Set off the introductory word(s) with a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

Reporters from all of the area newspapers interviewed the basketball coach. *Meanwhile*, photographers took pictures of the team practicing on the court.

Introductory Phrases

A phrase is a group of related words that function as a single part of speech. A phrase does not have a subject and a verb.

Prepositional Phrases

A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and another word in the sentence. A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition (e.g., *about, as, in, on, of, to, with*) and ends with a noun or pronoun (may include modifiers). Prepositional phrases can function as adjectives that modify a noun or pronoun, or they can function as adverbs that modify a verb, adjective, or other adverb.

An introductory phrase may include more than one prepositional phrase. Place the comma at the end of the entire introductory phrase and before the independent clause begins.

On our walk in the woods, we saw a variety of birds.

Comma Usage with Introductory Prepositional Phrases

A comma is used after a prepositional phrase of four words or more.

After six hours on an airplane, I couldn't wait to walk around and explore the village.

The use of a comma varies for shorter phrases. A comma may be used if it helps to clarify the intended meaning of the sentence.

On the floor rugs of all sizes were on sale. (Meaning is unclear.)

On the floor, rugs of all sizes were on sale. (Comma helps to clarify meaning.)

Never place a comma after a phrase that is immediately followed by a verb.

Into the raging river plummeted the raft with its frightened occupants.

Comma Usage with Other Common Types of Introductory Phrases

Use a comma after an introductory participial phrase (verb ending with *-ing, -ed, -en* + object) that functions as an adjective or an adverb. A participial phrase may include a prepositional phrase.

Looking back on the experience, I learned a valuable lesson about friendship.

Use a comma after an introductory infinitive phrase (*to* + present-tense verb + object) that modifies a noun or a verb. An infinitive phrase may include a prepositional phrase.

To trick its enemies, the opossum lies completely still and appears to be dead.

Introductory Clauses

A clause is a group of words that has a subject and a predicate. A complex sentence includes “an independent clause and at least one dependent clause” (ELAR TEKS Glossary).

An independent clause is “a group of words containing a subject and a verb that can stand alone as a complete sentence; also called a main clause” (ELAR TEKS Glossary).

However, a subordinate (or dependent) clause cannot stand alone because it does not express a complete thought (even though it contains a subject and verb). In a sentence, a subordinate clause may be used as an adverb, an adjective, or a noun. It modifies the “main or independent clause to which it is joined” (ELAR TEKS Glossary).

Comma Usage with Introductory Adverb Clauses

A comma is used in complex sentences after an introductory subordinate (or dependent) clause that functions as an adverb. Adverb clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions.

after, although, as, when, while, until, because, before, if, since

Since it was raining, my family cancelled our picnic in the park.

Note: Some words—such as after, before, and until—can be used as both subordinating conjunctions and prepositions.