

Grammar: using commas

Whilst the use of commas can be guided by personal and stylistic preference, there are rules which can be useful to consider as you are reviewing your writing. Commas have three main uses which are to link, list and bracket.

Using linking commas

Linking commas can be used to connect two statements. However, the comma must be followed with a connecting word (a coordinating conjunction) such as “and”, “or”, “but”, “while”.

For example:

There is a lack of literature about Newcastle, but there are some recent publications about the North East.

Using listing commas

Listing commas are used in lists of more than two things and replace “and” or “or”.

For example:

Publications about the North East focus on football, nightlife, industry, and tourism.

The final comma (also known as the Oxford comma) is optional. It is used to draw attention to the separation of the last two items in the list and to avoid confusion. Without the final comma, “industry” and “tourism” may be perceived as a combined area of literature. Some people opt to use the Oxford comma even when a list has no potential confusion. Whilst both are correct, it is good practice to be consistent.

Listing commas are also used if more than one describing word (adjective) precedes something.

For example:

This contemporary, peer-reviewed literature about Newcastle provides a starting point for this assignment.

Using bracketing commas

Bracketing commas are used to mark additional information in a sentence.

For example:

These studies, in spite of their shared focus on locality, approach the topic from contrasting perspectives.

You can check you have used these commas correctly by removing the bracketed section from the sentence. If the sentence still makes sense, you have used bracketing commas correctly.

For example:

These studies approach the topic from contrasting perspectives.

When the interruption comes at the start or end of the sentence, only one of the two bracketing commas is used.

For instance:

In spite of their shared focus on this locality, these studies approach the topic from contrasting perspectives.

OR

These studies approach the topic from contrasting perspectives, in spite of their shared focus on this locality.

The examples above place importance on different aspects of the sentence. When constructing a sentence, it can be helpful to lead with the key point before providing any additional content

Techniques to try: LLB comma checklist

Listing: Can it be replaced with 'and' or 'or'?

Linking: Is it followed by a connecting word (and, or, yet, but, while)

Bracketing: Does it form part of a pair which indicates additional information without which the sentence still makes sense?

If you answer no to these questions, it is likely that the comma is optional or incorrectly used.

If you thought this guide was helpful, you might also find the 'run-on sentences' guide useful.