

GRAMMAR & READING CHEAT SHEET

4 COMMA RULES TO KNOW

1. Lists

Use a comma to separate items on a list.

*see sources below

Snowball prefers songs with a regular, funky beat.

Regular and *funky* are both describing *beat*. If you would say *regular and funky* then you can say *regular, funky*.

Snowball seems to like best the music of The Backstreet Boys, Lady Gaga, and Queen.

Whenever you have three or more items on a list, always use a comma before the “and” preceding the final item. This is a rule that not everyone agrees on, but if you apply the 4 C’s, the extra comma makes your meaning *Clear*. On the ACT, always use the comma before the “and.”

2. Introductory Clause

A comma can link an incomplete idea to a complete idea, in either order.

After Snowball stopped dancing, the trainer gave the bird another treat.

Although they may be ugly, your toes look strong.

Though his breath was so stank, he still found a date to the prom.

Commas work like blinking yellow lights: They slow down but do not stop ideas. Since the goal is to be concise, use a comma only for a specific reason. On the ACT, there are only four reasons to use a comma.

3. Separation of 2 Complete Sentences

A comma by itself can’t come in between two complete ideas, but it can when it’s paired with what we call FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*. A comma plus any of these is the equivalent of Stop punctuation. These words also impact direction, which might influence the correct answer.

I am smart. I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart; I am cool. Yes, ok. **Semi-colon = Period**

I am smart, I am cool. **No Can Do. Needs one of the FANBOYS!**

I am smart, FOR I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, AND I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, NOR I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, BUT I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, OR I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, YET I am cool. Yes, ok.

I am smart, SO I am cool. Yes, ok.

For the record, all conjunctions link things, but coordinating conjunctions—that is, FANBOYS—specifically come in between two ideas and are never a part of either idea.

4. Unnecessary Info in Middle or End of Sentence

Use a pair of commas around unnecessary information.

Further research has shown that parrots, including cockatoos, can dance in perfect synch to music.

If information is necessary to the sentence in either meaning or structure, don’t use the commas. If the meaning would be exactly the same but the additional information makes the sentence more interesting, use a pair of commas—or a pair of dashes—around the information.

I drove my car.

I drove my car to the store.

I drove my car, which was a black Cadillac.

I drove my car, which was a big Cadillac, to the store.

I drove my car - which was a big Cadillac - to the store.

I drove my car (which was a big Cadillac) to the store.

I ate the entire pizza, wolfing and slobbering it like a hungry dawg.

Thousands of people line H Street.

It’s the beginning of February, and as they do every year, thousands of people line H Street, the heart of Chinatown in Washington, DC.

* sources: The Princeton Review’s Cracking the ACT, Sister Anne, and my mama