

## Taming Commas

### Unlearn bad habits: “Don’t tell ME where to breath!”

In contrast to what you may have learned somewhere, commas are NOT breath marks. You do not have the right to tell your reader when and where to take a breath.

### Identify subjects and verbs

Don’t separate a subject from its verb with a comma.

Keep subjects and verbs close together for clarity.

Use the location of the other text relative to the subject-verb pair to determine whether or not you need a comma.

*Example:*

*In their study on military families experiencing deployment, Chartrand, Frank, White and Shope (2008) observed that children presented increased levels of anxious depressive and emotional reactive symptoms independent of the non-deployed parent’s symptoms of stress and depression.*

A. Subj.

In their study on military families experiencing deployment Chartrand Frank White and Shope

Verb B.

(2008) observed **that children presented increased levels of anxious depressive and emotional reactive symptoms independent of the non-deployed parent’s symptoms of stress and depression**

**A.** marks a dependent clause (easily identified by the fact that it comes BEFORE the subject and starts with something other than a noun—in this case, a preposition).

**B.** marks another dependent clause (easily identified by the fact that it comes AFTER the verb and starts with the relative pronoun “that”).

Use the reverse of this page to determine where to put commas.

## Comma Usage

### Independent clause, coordinating conjunction independent clause.

*I went to the store.*                      **Independent clauses are complete sentences by themselves.**  
*I stopped by the library.*

*I went to the store, and I stopped by the library.*

*Parents of military dependents have frequently expressed concern over the lack of academic support for their children, and these concerns appear to be warranted.*

### Dependent clause, independent clause.

*After I went to the store*                      **Dependent clauses cannot stand alone.**  
*I stopped by the library.*

*After I went to the store, I stopped by the library.*

COMPARE: *I stopped by the library after I went to the store.*      **No comma**

*During a study on military families experiencing deployment, researchers observed that children presented increased levels of anxious-depressive and emotional-reactive symptoms independent of the non-deployed parent's symptoms of stress and depression.*

### ...item A, B, and C....

*I need to buy milk, eggs, sugar, and toast.*                      **The final (Oxford) comma—to use or not?**

*I went to the store with my sister, a chiropractor and a pet-lover.*

**How many people did I take to the store?**

### ...item A 1 and 2; item B 1, 2, 3, and 4; and item C...      **(Semi-colons in a series)**

*I propose to study the anxious, depressive, and emotional reactive symptoms of the children; the stress and depression of the at-home parents; the resulting long-term social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of dependent children; and the adultification of these children.*

### ..., non-restrictive element, ....      **(commas come in pairs)**

*My sister, who lives in Michigan, will visit at Christmas.*                      **1 sister = necessary commas**  
*My sister who lives in Michigan will visit at Christmas.*                      **2+ sisters = no commas**

*Exposure to adverse stressful events, such as maternal depression or financial stress, has been linked to behavior problems.*