

COMMAS

In order for the following set of rules to make sense, you need to understand the difference between a phrase and a clause (dependent or independent).

A **phrase** is a group of words that does not express a complete thought. It might have a subject or a verb, but it does not have both. As a result, the phrase does not make sense standing by itself:

Dressed by his bed
Tired from holding the fishing line all night
This morning in the boat

By contrast, a **clause** has a *subject* and a verb that goes with the subject; a clause makes sense by itself.

The old man dressed by his bed.
He was tired from holding the fishing line all night.

The above examples are called **independent clauses** because they make sense on their own. However, if you put a “dependent clause marker” (a subordinating conjunction) in front of them, they lose their independence. They are now called dependent clauses because they need another independent clause to make sense as part of a complex sentence.

***While** the old man dressed by his bed, the boy went out to get coffee for the two of them.*
***Although** he was tired from holding the fishing line all night, he would not let the fish go.*

► USE A COMMA BEFORE “FANBOYS” (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) IF THEY CONNECT INDEPENDENT CLAUSES.

The old man had been out at sea for a long time, but he did not catch any fish.
He ran his fingers across the cuts in his hand, and the sun beat down on him and reflected off of the water.

► USE A COMMA AFTER INTRODUCTORY WORD, PHRASE, OR DEPENDENT CLAUSE

“Well, today I’ll catch something,” he said.
“No, I am not hungry,” he told the boy.
After a few hours, the old man noticed sharks in the water.
Even though he could not see them, the sharks had eaten most of his catch.

► USE A COMMA BETWEEN ITEMS IN A SERIES (more than 2 items)

The boat was small, old, and wooden.
When the old man returned to his bed, he was exhausted, sad, and hungry.

► USE COMMAS AFTER INDEPENDENT CLAUSE MARKERS (such as *however, therefore, consequently, moreover, nevertheless, furthermore, etc.*) AND TRANSITIONAL PHRASES (such as *for example, in fact, as a result, etc.*); USE SEMICOLONS OR PERIODS BEFORE THESE WORDS/PHRASES.

The boy trusted the old man could take care of himself; however, deep inside he was also afraid for him. As a result, he often found himself daydreaming about the old man.

► USE COMMAS TO SET OFF NOUNS OF DIRECT ADDRESS AND QUESTION TAGS

“Give in, fish, give yourself up to me,” the old man said aloud.
“You’ll make a great catch today, won’t you?” ask the boy.

ESSENTIAL AND NON-ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS: HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE

When an essential element (word, phrase, or clause) is removed, the sentence becomes too vague; if a non-essential element is removed, the sentence still makes the same basic sense as before.

The old man loved the sea and the fish that he saw on his trips.

The old man loved the sea and the fish. (Which fish? The sentence is too general now → the underlined part is essential.)

The sleepy coastal village, which is home to many fishermen, began to worry about the old man.

The sleepy coastal village began to worry about the old man. (The sentence still makes the same sense as before → the underlined part is non-essential.)

Tips:

- Phrases and clauses following a proper name of a person, place, or thing are always non-essential: the name sufficiently identifies the person/place/thing you are talking about.
- “That” clauses are always essential.

Word groups following nouns and describing these nouns more closely (called “appositives”) are non-essential and need commas.

He ate the flying fish, a rough tasting fish, little by little.

The old man liked to talk about DiMaggio and Sisler, American baseball players, with the boy.

► USE COMMAS AROUND PHRASES OR CLAUSES IF THEY INTERRUPT THE FLOW OF THE SENTENCE AND ARE NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE.

The other boats, there in the harbor, began to move out in the dark of the morning.

The boy, also a fisherman, liked fishing with the old man best.

The old man said he had yellow rice and fish to eat. He did not, however, have anything at all to eat in the house.

► DO NOT USE COMMAS BEFORE OR AROUND ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS.

The little birds that flew over long distances across the sea made the old man feel sorry for them.

The old man was grateful for the boy who brought him food and coffee.

► DO NOT USE COMMAS BEFORE DEPENDENT CLAUSES FOLLOWING THE MAIN CLAUSE.

He called the sea “le mar” because that was what people called her in Spanish when they loved her.

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*!