Commas (1)

A comma is used to mark a short pause, shorter than a pause made by a full stop. It can be used to separate two words, or a group of words, in a sentence, in order to make the meaning clear.

A list of words in a sentence

They may be nouns, adjectives, or verbs. The last word in the list is usually joined to the list by "and" instead of a comma.

We will need hammers, nails and a saw.
Mr Parker was a warm, hospitable man.
She stopped, stared and ran.

The list may consist of groups of words, instead of single words:

Terry frightens the cat, teases the dog, bullies his brother and annoys the neighbours.

Try these:

1. The monster was huge fat and spiky.
2. Everyone threw spears stones swords and boiling oil at the creature.
3. It roared growled spat and groaned but still did not die.
4. A knight appeared wearing bright shining armour and pierced the beast with his special magic sword.
5. The huge beast screamed fell to the ground rolled over and died.
6. The king rewarded the knight with gold silver diamonds rubies and other precious things.

Long sentences:

Two or more simple clauses joined together by words like "but", "or", "nor", "so", "either" and "neither" are separated by a comma before the joining word.

We queued for the concert for four hours, but we didn't manage to get tickets.

A sentence is sometimes made up of a main clause with one or more subordinate clauses, joined by words like "when", "because" and "although". A subordinate clause is often separated from a main clause by a comma, especially if it comes before the main clause.

When he saw the pirate ship on the horizon, the captain gave the alarm.

Linking words (conjunctions): after, before, until, while, since, if, unless, thought, as, for

Test yourself:

1. The robber climbed through the window crept up the stairs and peered into the bedroom.
2. She called as loudly as she could but nobody could hear her.
3. The telephone was not far away yet there was little she could do to reach it.
4. She switched on all the lights so the man ran away in a panic.
5. The policeman who arrived later told her to put a lock on her window.

Commas with AND

Commas are not generally used with "and". In a list "and" tends to replace the comma, but sometimes you need to use a comma before and to make the meaning absolutely clear.
How many horses? What's the name of the last horse?
The best horses in the race were Peacemaker, Starlight, Mr Speedy, Windstorm, and Thunder and Lightning.