



# Proofreading Your Writing

Commas tend to give many writers problems. Here are four steps that will help you to proofread for commas.

## Step 1

- Give yourself enough time to read your paper **s l o w l y** several times. Double-space your paper and print it out. If you try to proofread on-screen, you will probably miss errors in your paper because they are harder to see.
- Look at your paper one paragraph or page at a time.
- Look for only comma mistakes. You can check for other mistakes later.
- Use a colored pen or highlighter.

## Step 2

- Know what you're looking for. Keep a list next to you of the errors you tend to make, or of those your instructor is likely to notice.
- Keep a reference book, dictionary, website, or personal cheat sheet handy.
- All writers rely on dictionaries and handbooks when they proofread.

## Step 3

Review the rules for the errors you tend to make. Here's a quick list for comma rules.

Commas are commonly used:

- Between items in a list, including a comma before **and**.
  - *I'm going shopping for coffee, cream, and popcorn.*
- Before the conjunctions **and**, **but**, or **or** when there is a complete sentence before and after the conjunction. Otherwise, don't use a comma.
  - Yes to a comma: *I want to read this book, and then you and I can go out.*
  - No to a comma: *I want to read this book and then look for others by the same author.*
- After an introductory phrase or clause.
  - *In the middle of the night, life in the woods comes alive with owls and raccoons.*
  - *When I was a little girl back in Oklahoma, I loved to listen to the owls in the dark woods near my house.*

Commas are often used incorrectly to join two sentences. A more complete guide to commas can be found [online](#) or in a writer's handbook.

## Step 4

Here are some strategies for proofreading.

- Print out your paper in 14-point type so that you can see every punctuation mark clearly.
- Start at the beginning, covering up the rest of your paper as you focus on each line. If you're working on a screen, use the mouse as a highlighter.
- Start at the end of your paper and proofread for comma errors one sentence at a time. If you notice other types of errors, deal with them later.
- Read your paper aloud—slowly—and read only what you see (not what you intend).
- Go through your paper and circle every comma you're unsure about and every place you suspect you might need a comma. Then review your grammar handbook to see whether or not commas are called for in these places.
- Ask someone else to help you proofread your paper—a tutor in the Writing Center, for example. Use a spell check computer program, but don't rely on grammar and punctuation checkers because they are not reliable.

*The information on this page was written by Sandy Eckard and Ben Rafoth*