

Using commas with coordinate adjectives

Commas are used to separate coordinate adjectives—those that independently modify a noun—when they are of **equal rank** and can be switched around or joined with 'and' without altering the meaning of the sentence. For instance, in the sentence "She wore a beautiful, shimmering gown," the adjectives 'beautiful' and 'shimmering' are coordinate because you could say "She wore a beautiful and shimmering gown" or "She wore a shimmering, beautiful gown." (Switching the adjectives round still makes sense). They are also in the **same category of adjectives** (the quality of the appearance of the gown). A quick test is to insert the word 'and' between the adjectives; if the sentence still makes sense, then a comma is appropriate. If the adjectives do not pass this test, they are likely cumulative adjectives and should not be separated by a comma, as in "She had long blonde hair" where 'long' and 'blonde' cannot be switched nor can you insert 'and' between them. Also, these adjectives are in different categories – one is about the colour and one is about the length of the hair, so you do not to use a comma for different categories of adjectives.

The use of commas for coordinate adjectives can indeed involve more than just the 'and' rule, and it's important to approach it with nuance. Here is a more in-depth guidance paragraph:

When employing commas to separate coordinate adjectives, one should not only rely on the 'and' rule but also consider the **semantic** (meaning) relationship between the adjectives and the noun they modify. Coordinate adjectives are **equal in status** because they each independently describe the noun, without any of the adjectives depending on another for their meaning. Besides testing if 'and' can be inserted between them, one must also consider whether the adjectives are of a **different** category of noun but are of **equal** importance. For instance, adjectives that denote **different** qualities such as age, colour, size, shape, nationality, and material can **also** be considered coordinate when they modify the same noun and both adjectives are important to the meaning of the noun: "**The large, round table was set for dinner.**"

When an adjective relies on another for its meaning, it becomes a cumulative adjective, and no comma is used. For example, in "**a dark wooden table**," 'dark' modifies 'wooden table', explaining that the table is made of dark wood, so they are not separated by a comma. 'Dark's actually adding more to the word 'wooden' than the word table. Also, you cannot change the order – 'wooden dark table' makes no sense as the word 'dark' is actually modifying 'wood' not the table.

Finally, punctuation should serve **clarity** and **ease** of reading. If adding a comma between adjectives might lead the reader to misinterpret an adjective phrase as a compound noun (for example, "a high school student" versus "a high, school student"), then don't use the comma so you avoid confusion. When in doubt, read the sentence aloud to sense the natural pause or emphasis and consider if the comma aids in conveying the intended meaning.

Pop Quiz

Choose the sentence with the correct punctuation. Answers are at the bottom.

- 1A. Juanita has grown up to be a lovely, intelligent woman.
- 1B. Juanita has grown up to be a lovely intelligent woman.

- 2A. Be careful before walking on the hot, sharp lava.
- 2B. Be careful before walking on the hot sharp lava.

- 3A. That was a wonderfully, delicious dinner we had last night.
- 3B. That was a wonderfully delicious dinner we had last night.

- 4A. Edward seems very proud of his bright, red car.
- 4B. Edward seems very proud of his bright red car.

Pop Quiz Answers

1A. Juanita has grown up to be a lovely, intelligent woman.

2A. Be careful before walking on the hot, sharp lava.

3B. That was a wonderfully delicious dinner we had last night. (wonderfully is actually an adverb modifying the noun).

4B. Edward seems very proud of his bright red car.