**Comma Style Guide**

**The Editing Section of the Publishing Services Department**

**The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

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**PART 1: COMPOUND SENTENCES**

**A. Compound Sentences with Coordinating Conjunctions**

When two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction *(and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet),* a comma precedes the coordinating conjunction. Do not use a comma *after* the conjunction.

• Last year this ward baptized and confirmed 46 new members, and retention of those members is very high.

• The high-energy particles could not be seen, but they had to be carefully controlled to avoid harm to others.

• He gave up His life, and He conquered death and rose from the grave that we all will live again.

• God is in His heavens, and His promises are sure.

*Exception:* The comma may be omitted when both clauses are very short and there is no chance that readers will misconstrue which elements are joined by the conjunction. However, this situation is uncommon, and commas should generally be used to ensure clarity.

• Tom bought the presents and his wife wrapped them.

These guidelines also apply to imperative sentences joined by a coordinating conjunction.

• Read or have a participant read the following case study, and discuss what this young family is doing to follow the prophet’s counsel.

• Scan the bar code for the temple list name, or type the bar code number and press **Enter**.

• Call Ellen sometime next week, and ask whether she will speak at our conference next fall.

• Raise your right hand and repeat after me.

**B. Sentences with Compound Predicates**

Be careful to distinguish between a compound sentence and a sentence with a compound verb or other compound element in the predicate. In most cases, commas should not be used between the parts of a compound predicate.

*• Compound sentence:* The committee will meet tomorrow, and they will review the report on Tuesday.

*• Compound verb:* The committee will meet tomorrow and will mail the report on Tuesday.

• I prayed over and over again but still did not know what to do for his leaking tricuspid valve.

• They plotted to take his life and finally sold him as a slave.

• I sustain him as prophet, seer, and revelator and intend to follow his counsel.

• Those who view every calamity and measure every new assertion or discovery against the standard of revealed truth need not be “tossed to and fro” but can be steady and at peace.

• We should thank God for our adversities and pray for guidance in meeting them.

*• Compound object:* Those who never gave up will find that God never gave up and that He will help them.

• As we do so, I promise doors will open and we will be blessed to recognize and act upon the opportunities that will be provided.

*• Compound prepositional phrase:* On this occasion I am not going to talk about the good or bad of Prohibition but rather about uncompromising loyalty to the Church.

*Exception:* A comma is placed before the conjunction in a compound predicate only if there is a chance that readers will misconstrue which elements are being joined (in which case the sentence should probably be recast, if possible).

• The committee will meet tomorrow, and on Tuesday will issue its report.

**C. Compound Sentences with Conjunctive Adverbs**

Conjunctive adverbs can be used to join two clauses. In such cases, generally put a semicolon before the conjunctive adverb and a comma after it. In the case of some one-syllable conjunctive adverbs, such as *hence, now, then,* and *thus,* the comma after the word is not needed.

• It is nearly half past five; therefore, we cannot reach town before dark.

• We hoped for sunshine; instead, we got rain.

• They gave us an oral approval; however, we’re still waiting for written confirmation.

• Interest rates rose; thus real estate prices declined.

• We sent the proposal to the client; then we decided to wait until he responded.

**PART 2: INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS**

As a general rule, a comma **should be included** after an introductory element if:

1. The introductory element is long (definitions of *long* vary, but the maximum length of an introductory element that would *not* require a comma is usually five or six words).

2. The comma helps with clarity by preventing misreading (such as a mistaken junction).

3. The comma helps with clarity by facilitating ease of reading (such as to cue the reader where the main clause begins).

4. The comma helps with desired emphasis.

As a general rule, a comma **may be omitted** after a short introductory element if:

1. The introductory element may be incorporated into the flow of the sentence without a pause.

2. Clarity and facility in reading are not sacrificed.

**A. Introductory Dependent Clauses**

Set off an introductory dependent clause with a comma.

• When parents mourn for disobedient and wayward children, friends should provide comfort and support.

• When I was a university student, I rarely went to sleep before midnight.

• If any of you think you can have it both ways, you are only deceiving yourselves.

• If we are conscientiously trying to avoid the very appearance of evil, we will act for ourselves and not be acted upon.

• After some years had passed, the situation changed.

• When all is said and done, we are people of peace.

*Note:* When a dependent clause occurs at the beginning of the second part of a compound sentence, use a comma only after the clause, not before.

• I had to sort everything by hand, and if Beth had not stayed to help me, I would still be working on this job.

**B. Introductory Verbals**

Use a comma after an introductory verbal or verbal phrase. A verbal is a verb form that is used as a modifier or noun. It cannot stand alone as the verb of a sentence.

*• Infinitive phrase:* To get the best results, follow the instructions.

*• Present participial phrase:* Seizing the opportunity, he presented the plans.

*• Past participial phrase:* Established in 1905, the company takes great pride in its reputation for high-quality products.

*• Past participle alone:* Concerned, she denied the claim.

*Note:* Be aware of phrases that look like introductory verbal phrases but actually serve as the subject of the sentence or part of the predicate. No comma is used with these phrases.

• To lose 20 pounds was his goal.

• Looking for good examples has taken me longer than I had hoped.

• Running along behind the wagon was the queen herself!

**C. Introductory Prepositional Phrases**

Use a comma after an introductory prepositional phrase if the phrase is long or if a comma helps provide clarity by marking the junction between the phrase and clause.

• Of the newer photocopiers, this one is the fastest.

• With one exception, the programs received excellent evaluations.

• With these few words, Jesus declared His kingdom independent from this world.

• On the first and third Mondays of every month, the reports must be copied and mailed.

• In a small town near the Canadian border, hundreds of tourists come every summer to fish.

• Before using the printer, the operator must check the paper supply and the toner.

• After declining in January, stock prices rose in February.

• According to her, we have progressed a great deal.

• In my opinion, you have done more for him than he had any right to expect.

*Note:* A comma is not used after an introductory prepositional phrase if the word order in the rest of the sentence is inverted and the verb immediately follows the phrase.

• Out of an initial investment of $100 dollars came a stake that is currently worth more than $1,000.

• In an article I read in *Time* was an account of his experience.

*• But:* In an article I read in *Time,* there was an account of his experience.

Generally a comma is not needed after an introductory prepositional phrase if the phrase is short, if it may be incorporated into the flow of the sentence without a pause, and if clarity is not sacrificed. Most short introductory prepositional phrases that refer to time or place do not need to be followed by commas.

• To us the result seemed obvious.

• On Monday we will have staff meeting.

• In the morning things may look better.

• On one occasion the Savior looked upon them as sheep having no shepherd.

• In Utah we found a comfortable home.

• In his lecture he referred to creation and a Creator as he talked about his science.

• During general conference we challenged young men to prepare to serve missions.

• During my lifetime I have been a farmer and a father of a large family.

*Exceptions:* To prevent misreading, use a comma after a short prepositional phrase to separate two numbers or to separate two proper nouns. Always set off the year in a three-part date (month-day-year style) no matter where it is in the sentence.

*•* On October 28, 2000, the committee met for the last time.

• In 1834 the Prophet Joseph Smith received many more revelations.

*• But:* In 1834, 200 people attended the revival.

• By evening Central Park was covered with snow.

*• But:* On Tuesday, Central Park was covered with snow.

• In Gethsemane the Savior knelt to pray.

*• But:* In Gethsemane, Jesus knelt to pray.

**D. Introductory Conjunctive Adverbs**

Conjunctive adverbs are adverbs or short adverbial phrases that connect two main clauses or sentences. They also show relationships and provide transitions between the clauses or sentences.

As a general rule, use a comma after an introductory conjunctive adverb that signals a strong transition. However, a comma may not be needed after an introductory conjunctive adverb that (1) does not signal a strong transition or (2) may be incorporated into the flow of the sentence without a loss of clarity or an intervening pause. Decisions about using commas with conjunctive adverbs can depend on context. For that reason, the commas shown in the isolated sentences below are not intended to dictate a style for individual conjunctive adverbs but rather to show what has been the most common practice in a large sample of Church publications.

*Conjunctive adverbs* ***of comparison or contrast*** *(such as however, instead, likewise, nevertheless, nonetheless, and otherwise):*

• However, the children soon became tired and went to bed.

• Likewise, their friends also went to sleep.

• Nevertheless, I woke them up to finish their homework.

• Otherwise, they would have failed the test.

*Conjunctive adverbs* ***of cause or effect*** *(such as accordingly, as a result, consequently, hence, similarly, therefore, and thus):*

• Accordingly, we are expediting the construction of these buildings.

• As a result, we have had to hire more contractors.

• Consequently, the labor market for construction workers is tightening.

• Similarly, the labor market for editors is tightening.

• Therefore, editors should be paid more.

• Thus, they thought it wise to make a case to the Human Resource Department. (Unless a pause is desired for emphasis, the need for a comma after *thus* is not as strong as after the preceding conjunctive adverbs in this list.)

*Conjunctive adverbs* ***of addition*** *(such as additionally, besides, further, furthermore, in addition, incidentally, and* *moreover):*

• Additionally, editors love debating the use of commas.

• Besides, the use of commas can affect the meaning of a sentence.

• Moreover, these guidelines can help editors be more consistent in using commas.

*Conjunctive adverbs* ***of emphasis*** *(such as certainly, indeed, still, and undoubtedly):*

Certainly the historical record would suggest otherwise.

Indeed we are a humble group.

Indeed, hobbled cattle are less likely to wander.

Still the project kept moving forward.

Still, modern researchers may discover new information

*Conjunctive adverbs* ***of time*** *(such as finally, meanwhile, in the meantime, next, now, then, and thereafter):*

Finally we determined that he simply needs to feel accepted.

Finally, recognize his need to feel accepted. (A comma after *finally* is usually preferred when the clause that follows is imperative or when the sentence is finishing a series of steps or ideas, making it transitional.)

In the meantime we will be sure to laugh at all his jokes.

In the meantime, be sure to laugh at all his jokes.

Then he will feel better about himself.

Thereafter he may be more pleasant to work with.

Next he may start bringing treats to work.

Next, recipes should be checked for completeness.

Now the stakes of Zion number in the thousands and are all over the world.

Now, I am not suggesting that we move to the wilderness and lock our doors.

**E. Other Introductory Words and Phrases**

*Introductory words that refer to time*

Unless a comma is needed to facilitate clarity or to prevent misreading, omit it after introductory words that refer to time.

Recently we had a request for more information.

Occasionally they went to bed early.

Frequently I read the newspaper while eating lunch.

Often this requires me to use my elbows.

One day each of us will run out of tomorrows.

Each spring there is flooding in the valley.

*But:* Each spring, rain causes flooding in the valley.

*Sentence adverbs (also called sentence modifiers)*

A sentence adverb is an adverb or adverbial phrase that modifies an entire clause or sentence. Sentence adverbs are distinguished from conjunctive adverbs in that they are not as strongly transitional and connective.

Introductory sentence adverbs should be set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma if the comma facilitates clarity by marking the junction between the adverb and the clause. A comma may not be needed if the introductory sentence adverb can be incorporated into the flow of the sentence without a loss of clarity or any intervening pause.

In the examples that follow, note that when a sentence adverb is followed by an adjective, an adverb, a verb, or a noun, then a comma is likely to be needed. When a sentence adverb is followed by an article or a pronoun, then a comma may not be needed.

Ordinarily, troubled teens need more tough love.

Ordinarily a testimony comes as you seek it with a sincere heart.

Apparently, crafty car salesmen are not hard to find.

Apparently she didn’t mind that we were late.

Specifically, exercise at least three times a week for 30 minutes a day.

Specifically we have been counseled to store a year’s supply of food.

Some introductory sentence adverbs express a writer’s attitude or sentiment toward a clause or sentence. Examples include *unfortunately, ideally, hopefully, thankfully, obviously, oddly, actually, frankly, admittedly, of course,* and *personally.* The guidelines above for punctuating other introductory sentence adverbs also apply to these.

Unfortunately, heirs of the telestial kingdom will be denied many blessings.

Unfortunately we were interrupted by the other guests.

Ideally, obviously troubled people should not be employed as editors.

Ideally the choir director has others who are called to help.

Obviously, secret prayer is necessary in many cases where we cannot pray vocally.

Obviously the burdens of life vary from person to person.

Clearly, confused editors are in the minority.

Clearly we have a lot of work to do.

Hopefully, rowdy children will be more respectful after this lesson.

Hopefully we learned our lesson.

Generally, needy members are given assignments that allow them to serve others.

Generally the media have been kind to us.

*Requests or commands*

Use a comma after an introductory request or command.

Look, we’ve been through tougher situations before.

You see, the previous campaigns never did pan out.

Please remember, all expense reports must be on my desk by Friday.

*But:* Please remember that . . .

**PART 3: RESTRICTIVE AND NONRESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS**

When phrases or dependent clauses occur within the main clause or following the main clause, commas are omitted or used depending on whether the phrase or clause is restrictive (essential) or nonrestrictive (nonessential). Punctuation in these situations is not a matter of personal preference because it affects the meaning of the sentence.

**A. Clauses**

A **restrictive clause** is one that is essential to the meaning of the sentence; it limits the meaning or extent of the independent clause. These clauses are not set off with commas.

A **nonrestrictive clause** is not essential to the meaning of the sentence; that is, it could be deleted from the sentence without changing its meaning. These clauses are set off with commas.

*Dependent clauses in the middle of a sentence*

The material that the class will need is included on the last page of the document. *(restrictive)* (*That* always introduces a restrictive clause, so no commas are used.)

The following material, which you may hand to the class if you wish, is taken from the book *The Miracle of Forgiveness. (nonrestrictive)*

Janetta Williams, who is directing the marketing campaign, is arriving today. *(nonrestrictive)*

We are grateful for our loving Savior, who redeemed us from death and sin. *(nonrestrictive)*

My sister, who lives in New York, writes for public television. *(nonrestrictive; I have only one sister.)*

My sister who sings opera lives in New York. My other sister lives in Pocatello. *(restrictive)*

*Dependent clauses at the end of a sentence*

When an adverbial dependent clause at the end of a sentence is nonrestrictive, it is set off with a comma (most adverbial dependent clauses at the end of sentences are restrictive and so are not set off with commas). It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a dependent clause at the end of a sentence is restrictive or nonrestrictive. Examples of such situations follow.

The teacher should present the approved lesson unless unusual circumstances dictate otherwise. *(restrictive)*

Tom left out the garlic powder, although he would have preferred to use it liberally. *(nonrestrictive)* (*Although, though,* and *even though* are always nonrestrictive.)

His faxed response came after you left last evening. *(restrictive)*

His faxed response came this morning, after the decision had been made. *(nonrestrictive)*

The accountants will be busy until April 15, when federal tax returns are due. *(nonrestrictive)*

He counseled that the grain and the weeds grow together until the time of harvest, when the wheat would be bundled separately from the weeds. *(nonrestrictive)*

We have taken no more applications since we received your memo. *(restrictive)*

We are taking no more applications, since our lists are now closed. *(nonrestrictive)*

She left because she had another appointment. *(restrictive)* (Dependent clauses beginning with *because* are generally restrictive.)

I knew that President Nixon would resign that morning, because my sister-in-law worked in the White House and she called me with the news. *(nonrestrictive)* (In unusual situations, a *because* clause can be nonrestrictive and should be set off with a comma; however, such constructions may be confusing to the reader and should generally be avoided when the editor has a choice.)

**B. Appositives**

An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that identifies or gives additional information about a preceding noun or pronoun. If an appositive could be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence (nonrestrictive), set it off with commas. If an appositive cannot be omitted (restrictive), do not use commas.

My son Michael was the first one to reply. *(restrictive; I have more than one son.)*

O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape* was being revived. *(restrictive; he wrote more than one play.)*

The leader of the opposition, Senator Darkswain, had an unaccountable change of heart.

My wife, Elizabeth, had written to our congressman.

The movie *Casablanca* is being released again this year.

Our beloved colleague Elder Neal A. Maxwell has given us a noble example of this.

As we apply these principles in our lives, we become more like Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, and we prepare ourselves to live with them eternally.

Easter is a time when the Christian world focuses on and rejoices in the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My wife, Frances, and I have exchanged Christmas cards every year with Bob and his wife, Grace.

In ancient times the prophet Lehi taught this truth to his son Jacob.

They sang the beautiful hymn “How Firm a Foundation.”

They sang a beautiful hymn, “How Firm a Foundation.”

*Note:* When appositives consist of or contain quotations, follow the same rules as for other appositives.

The aphorism “Brevity is the soul of wit” was lost on Morgenstern.

With yet another aphorism, “Brevity is the soul of wit,” Nunbush launched himself into a long and dreary discourse.

The motto “All for one and one for all” appears over the door.

Their motto, “All for one and one for all,” appears over the door.

In answer to the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” he told a personal story.

He asked an obvious question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

The sign read “Danger!”

**C. Interrupters and Transitional Elements**

Interrupters and other transitional elements that make a distinct break in thought are often nonrestrictive and so require commas. However, if such elements cause no real break in thought and no need to pause in reading, do not use commas.

This, indeed, was what we had feared would happen.

This was indeed what we had feared would happen.

I urge you all, therefore, to be loyal.

I therefore urge you all to remain loyal.

All the test animals, therefore, were reexamined.

All the test animals were therefore reexamined.

Their credibility, consequently, has been seriously challenged.

Their credibility has consequently been seriously challenged.

Wilcox, perhaps, had disclosed more than was necessary.

Wilcox had perhaps disclosed more than was necessary.

**D. *Such as* Constructions**

Follow the general rules governing restrictive and nonrestrictive elements when punctuating phrases with *such as.*

Aaronic Priesthood holders have many responsibilities, such as preparing and passing and sacrament, collecting fast offerings, and serving as home teachers. *(nonrestrictive)*

Everyone in our family likes such outdoor sports as tennis and swimming. *(restrictive)*

A number of Fortune 500 companies, such as GE, TRW, and DuPont, have introduced new programs to motivate their middle managers. *(nonrestrictive)*

Words such as *peak, peek,* and *pique* can be easily confused. *(restrictive)*

**PART 4: MISCELLANEOUS**

**A. Preventing a Mistaken Junction**

Commas are sometimes necessary to prevent a mistaken junction or to make the junction easier to find. Readers should not have to pause to determine where one phrase ends and another begins.

To Elijah, Jehovah said, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.”

For some, faith is not understood and consequently not used to full advantage.

Whenever possible, actions should be taken to ensure clients’ privacy.

Soon after, the company declared bankruptcy.

As soon as he stepped in, the elevator fell.

As the pond fills, the plants are killed off.

When the glaze is worn off, the inner surface becomes absorbent.

Through the Church, the Lord has established a way to care for the poor and needy and help them regain their self-reliance.

When we left, the people were all outside.

We live in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times.

I am grateful to belong to this, the true Church of Jesus Christ.

We will use many, if not most of your suggestions.

**B. The Serial Comma**

When a conjunction joins the last two elements in a series, a comma should be used before the conjunction to prevent ambiguity.

She went to the distribution center to buy lesson manuals, hymnbooks, and picture frames.

He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents.

Harris presented the proposal to the governor, the governor discussed it with the senator, and the senator made an appointment with the president.

*Note:* Do not insert a comma *after* the last item in a series unless the sentence structure requires a comma at that point.

He encouraged us to be obedient, true, and steadfast despite the challenges we may encounter.

May 8, June 11, and July 16 are the dates for the next three meetings.

The sale of suits, coats, hats, and so on, starts tomorrow.

*Note:* When *and, or,* or *nor* is used to connect all the items in a series, do not separate the items with a comma.

Send copies to our employees and stockholders and major customers.

**C. Coordinate Adjectives**

When two or more adjectives precede a noun, separate them with commas if each modifies the noun alone. (You can determine this by inserting *and* between the adjectives or by reversing the adjectives. If the meaning is not changed, use the comma.) If the first adjective modifies the idea expressed by the combination of the second adjective and the noun, no comma should be used.

Moses proved himself to be a loving, competent leader.

It is going to be a long, hot, exhausting summer.

The estate is surrounded by an old stone wall.

Three large brown birds flew out of the tree.

**D. Dates**

In the month-day-year style of dates, commas are used both before and after the year. Where month and year only are given, no comma is needed.

The ship sailed on October 6, 1999, for Southampton.

On October 31, 2006, I plan to retire and open a bookshop in Maine.

The April 1, 2000, press conference elicited little new information. (Try to avoid using a complete date that requires commas as an adjective.)

In March 2003 she turned 70.

On Thanksgiving Day 1998 they celebrated their 75th anniversary.

**E. Omission of Words**

A comma is often used to indicate the omission of a word or words that are readily understood from the context. The comma may be omitted if the elliptical construction is clear without it.

In Illinois there are 17 such schools; in Ohio, 20; in Indiana, 13.

Thousands rushed to serve him in victory; in defeat, none.

One child is good at composition, another at mathematics, and the third at sports.

Ronald adored her and she him.

**F. Addresses and Place-Names**

Use two commas to set off the name of a state, a country, or the equivalent when it directly follows the name of a city or county. No comma appears before a postal code.

The plane landed in Kampala, Uganda, that evening.

Could Pickaway County, Ohio, become a haven for retired editors?

Please send your submission to Church Magazines Editorial, 50 East North Temple Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84105-3220, USA, by January 2.

**G. Direct Address**

Use commas to set off words used in direct address.

No, Bishop Smith, I was not watching *Home Alone* on the ward’s video equipment.

Yes, Mr. Brown, I’m sure I finished the project on time.

Friends, I am not here to discuss personalities.

**H. Numbers**

In most numerals of one thousand or more, commas are used between groups of three digits. No commas are used in page numbers, addresses, and years.

1,512 32,987 4,000,500 page 1535 the year 1995

**I. Degrees and Titles**

Degrees and titles are set off with commas, but commas are not used around *Jr.* and *Sr.*

The consultant is Andrew Tyler, MD, a well-known surgeon.

Joseph Smith Jr. was born in Sharon, Vermont, in December 1805.

**J. The Adverb *Too***

Commas are generally not needed to set off the adverb *too* (in the sense of “also”). But when *too* interrupts the flow of the sentence, set it off with commas.

They are after a bigger share of the market too.

If you feel that way too, why don’t we just stop the negotiations?

You too could be in the Caribbean right now.

Then, too, there are additional taxes to be considered.

**K. *Not only . . . but***

This construction generally does not need to be set off with commas, butif commas help in ease of reading, use two.

The judge dismissed not only the parking ticket cases but several others as well.

They were armed not only with petitions but also with evidence.

They marched to Washington, not only armed with petitions and determined to get their senators’ attention, but also hoping to demonstrate their solidarity with one another.

*But:* John not only wants a higher discount, but he also demands faster turnarounds on his orders. (When *he* is inserted as the subject of the second predicate, the sentence becomes a compound sentence.)

**L. Names with *of* Phrases Identifying Residence, Position, or Church Unit**

For simplicity, do not use commas to set off *of* phrases with wards and stakes, states and countries, Church positions, or places of business or residence.

Gary Kendall of Provo, Utah, will be visiting us next week.

Gary Kendall of the Van Houten Corporation in Provo, Utah, will be visiting us next week.

Frank and Ellen Sorenson of Illinois wanted their children to know their grandparents.

The Lessie family of the Del Mar Ward, Del Mar California Stake, loves to serve in the community.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said that . . .

Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy said, . . .