

Disruptive Commas

The comma is a useful guide for readers. It tells readers when to pause, and it can clarify the meaning of a sentence. For example, the sentence “Later, survival past infancy became the norm.” is ambiguous without the comma. However, commas in the wrong place are disruptive because they break the flow of ideas. The sentences below contain disruptive commas which have been placed in parentheses for emphasis.

Do **not** use a comma :

- between a subject and its verb.

All of the habitable parts of the earth(,) **were believed** to be parts of a single land mass, *Orbis Terrarum*.

Profound **differences** in early training(,) crucially affect the entire society involved.

- between a verb and its object.

The second crucial point **was**(,) the United States’ **insistence** on inspections to ensure compliance of the disarmament pact.

The Affirmative Action policy **required**(,) **submission** of hiring procedures which were non-discriminatory.

- between two words, phrases, or dependent (subordinate) clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (*and, or, but, for, nor, so, yet*).

verbs Society must **reassign** the “pseudo-biological” role of child rearing(,) and **establish** it as an acceptable role for men.

In art, the thing which we cannot **measure**(,) or **use** for comparison is what we call “style.”

nouns As a result of a fluctuating economy, more and more **women**(,) and **men** are entering the work force.

clauses To understand **what Columbus’ problem was**(,) and **why he sought refuge in his Terrestrial Paradise**, we must remind ourselves of the Ptolemaic-Christian view of the lands of the earth.

prepositions Therefore, it is important to assess objectively the process for modifying patterns **of genes**(,) **of a human being**(,) **by various means**.

- After the last item in a series.

The role of women in a given culture, political system, or **social milieu**(,) is often pictured succinctly in a description of the work they do.

The examples of Annapolis, Williamsburg, Savannah, Washington, **and many other nineteenth-century planned state capital cities**(,) remind us that public initiative and investment in city planning once created an urban environment superior in quality to that of the present.

- Between an adjective or adverb and the word it modifies.

adverb/
adjective

Efron has an interesting chapter on the current fear of **extremely**(,) **low** doses of carcinogens and the question of safety thresholds.

In less than fifty years, it will be possible to set **up elaborately**(,) **constructed** rock boxes with large rock-storage capacities.

adjective/
noun

It is a complicated, **little-understood**(,) **process** that works well .

The **exciting, action-packed**(,) movie has received overwhelming, **critical, acclaim**.

adverb/
verb

If gestural language were necessary for chimpanzee survival, it would be **transmitted**(,) **culturally** through the generations.

The committee **planned** the new marketing campaign(,) **weekly**, monthly, and bimonthly.

- before or after a phrase or clause in the middle of a sentence when it restricts the meaning of the sentence.

The types of cancer(,) **which respond to chemotherapy**(,) are generally among the least common forms of the disease.

The effects of therapy(,) **resulting from radiation**(,) are still only vaguely understood.

- before a dependent (subordinate) clause when it comes after the main clause.

Americans themselves are profoundly discouraged by the handguns(,) **that seem to breed uncontrollably among them like roaches**.

The four-color brochure was replaced by a black and white brochure(,) **because of budget restrictions**.