

The Ten (Comma)ndments: Thou Shalt...

Comma Rule 1: Use a comma after an introductory word group that is not the subject of the sentence. If the introductory word group is less than five words, then the comma is optional.

Example 1: When Odysseus strings his legendary bow, Homer's language transforms him into a musician playing upon a deadly instrument.

Example 2: At this moment Odysseus becomes a musician playing his deadly instrument. (The comma is optional after "moment.")

Example 3: Thinking back on the twenty years they have lost, Odysseus and Penelope weep.

Example 4: Thinking back on the twenty years they have lost causes Odysseus and Penelope to weep. ("Thinking [...] lost" is the subject of the sentence.)

Comma Rule 2: Use a comma in front of conjunctions (and, or, but, yet, since, etc.) that join two complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses).

Example 1: Odysseus loves Penelope, and he also loves his life of adventure.

Example 2: Odysseus loves his life of adventure, but he loves Penelope more.

Example 3: Odysseus loves his life of adventure but loves Penelope more. (See CR 10b.)

Comma Rule 3: Use a comma or commas with transitional expressions (however, therefore, moreover, for example, on the other hand, in fact, etc.).

Example 1: On the one hand, Odysseus loves Penelope and wants to return to her.

Example 2: His love of fame and adventure, however, overshadows his love for his wife.

Comma Rule 4: Use a semi-colon and then a comma around transitional expressions that connect two independent clauses.

Example 1: Odysseus loves Penelope and wants to return to her; however, he loves fame and adventure, too.

Example 2: Odysseus actively participates in the myth-making process; therefore, whenever his various hosts ask him to share his story, he jumps at the opportunity.

Comma Rule 5: Use a comma after each item in a series. Also, note that items in a series must be parallel. The comma between the last item and the word "and" cannot be omitted unless all the items are connected by the word "and."

Example 1: Penelope has fabulous hair, a nice figure, and a lovely smile.

Example 2: While Odysseus is away, Penelope raises a son, runs a household, and stalls the suitors.

Example 3: I feel pretty, oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and gay.

Comma Rule 6: Use commas to set off nonessential (a.k.a., nonrestrictive) additions to a sentence. Do not use commas to set off essential (a.k.a., restrictive) words or word groups.

Example 1 (nonrestrictive): The scene where Odysseus describes the construction of his wedding bed, which always moves me to tears, is the climax of the chapter.

Example 2 (restrictive): A scene which always moves me to tears involves Odysseus describing the construction of his wedding bed.

Example 3 (nonrestrictive): One of the suitors, the cruel Antinoos, throws a stool at Odysseus.

Example 4 (restrictive): The cruel suitor Antinoos throws a stool at Odysseus. (Putting commas around "Antinoos" would imply that he is the only cruel suitor.)

Example 5 (rest.): The Greek poet Homer wrote *The Odyssey*. (There were/are many Greek poets.)

Comma Rule 7: Add a comma between coordinate adjectives, which are adjectives that can be joined by “and.” Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives, which are adjectives that cannot be joined by “and.”

Example 1: The intelligent, persistent Penelope holds off the suitors until Odysseus returns. (Here, one uses a comma because “and” can be used instead of the comma.)

Example 2: A beautiful Greek goddess holds Odysseus captive. (Here, the comma is omitted because one wouldn’t say, “A beautiful and Greek Goddess.”)

Comma Rule 8: Use a comma or commas to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence (examples 1 and 2), *unless* the quotation is preceded by a complete sentence; in that case, use a colon (example 3). If the word “that” precedes the quotation, then omit the comma (example 4).

Example 1: Odysseus tricks the Cyclops when he declares, “My name is Nohbdy” (156).

Example 2: Mom always said, “Don’t play ball in the house.”

Example 3: Odysseus, a trickster figure and a master of deception, fools the Cyclops into calling him a name that hides his identity: “My name is Nohbody: mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbdy” (156).

Example 4: Odysseus tricks the Cyclops when he declares that his “name is Nohbdy” (156).

Comma Rule 9: Learn to recognize “comma-splices.” A comma-splice occurs when two complete sentences are joined by a comma, creating a run-on sentence. Repair comma-splices in one of four ways: 1) add a conjunction after the comma; 2) turn the comma into a period and begin a new sentence; 3) turn the comma into a semi-colon; 4) turn one of the sentences into a dependent clause.

Comma-splice: Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, Aeneas accepts his fate.

1) Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, but Aeneas accepts his fate.

2) Odysseus questions the gods’ motives. Aeneas accepts his fate.

3) Odysseus questions the gods’ motives; however, Aeneas accepts his fate.

4) While Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, Aeneas accepts his fate.

Comma Rule 10: Thou shalt not put commas where they do not belong.

10a. Do not separate major elements of a sentence, especially the subject and verb.

Example: Bragging about his achievements, is one of Odysseus’s most annoying traits.

10b. Do not use a comma before a conjunction if an independent clause doesn’t follow it.

Example: Odysseus mourns his captivity by day, but still enters Circe’s bed each night.

10c. Do not add a comma after the final item in a series.

Example: Odysseus’s men die at the hands of the Cyclops, the Laistrygones, and Scylla, during their journey home.