

COMMA TIP 6

Use commas correctly with a series of adjectives.

Whenever you use more than one **adjective** to describe something, you must decide whether or not you need commas to separate the adjectives. *Coordinate* adjectives require commas. *Noncoordinate* adjectives, however, need no punctuation.

How do you tell the difference? *Coordinate* adjectives can pass the two tests below.

TEST 1 – WHEN YOU REVERSE THE ORDER OF THE ADJECTIVES, THE SENTENCE MAKES SENSE.

Read this example:

The **hungry, slimy, green** Martian entered the classroom, grabbed Claudette, and took her to lunch at Bernie’s Burger Emporium.

The three adjectives—**hungry, slimy**, and **green**—can alternate their positions without hurting the meaning of the sentence:

The **slimy, hungry, green** Martian entered the classroom ...

The **hungry, green, slimy** Martian entered the classroom ...

The **green, slimy, hungry** Martian entered the classroom ...

Because these adjectives can be interchanged, they are coordinate and must have commas between them.

TEST 2 – WHEN YOU INSERT AND BETWEEN THE ADJECTIVES, THE SENTENCE MAKES SENSE.

Read this example:

While writing his final exam, a **pale, sweating, panicky** student stared at his sentence, trying to decide if a comma was necessary between two adjectives.

Notice that you can insert **and** between the three adjectives and the sentence still makes sense (although there is some unnecessary repetition).

While writing his final exam, a **pale and sweating and panicky** student stared at his sentence ...

NONCOORDINATE ADJECTIVES FAIL BOTH TESTS.

Noncoordinate adjectives can pass neither of the tests above. Whenever you discover that you have noncoordinate adjectives in a sentence, use no punctuation between them.

Read this sentence:

Five flashy sports cars passed poor Jared, who rattled down the interstate in his ancient piece of junk.

Notice that if you move the location of the adjectives, you create illogic:

Sports flashy five cars passed poor Jared ... Huh?

Flashy sports five cars passed poor Jared ... What?

Five sports flashy cars passed poor Jared ... Makes no sense!

In addition, if you insert **and** between the adjectives, the sentence loses its meaning:

Five and flashy and sports cars passed poor Jared ... Excuse me?

When you encounter noncoordinate adjectives, those that fail the two tests detailed above, do not use commas between them.

QUICK TEST

Directions: Add commas where they are necessary.

1. Two ☐ cluttered ☐ computer tables and an unmade ☐ sagging bed fill Antonio's small bedroom.

2. The cute ☐ soft ☐ frisky ferret will bite your fingers if you try to pick him up.
3. Michael's faded ☐ ragged ☐ New York Jets jacket was an inappropriate choice of clothing for his second interview at Sun Trust Bank.
4. The hot ☐ spicy ☐ appetizing squid eyeball stew steamed in a bowl on the clean ☐ shiny ☐ kitchen counter.
5. A strange smell emanated from Barbara's blue ☐ disorganized ☐ book bag, which lay on the floor beside her desk.

