

## The Comma

### UNC Asheville Writing Center

“Is it not a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt for so small a thing? So small a thing!” J.R.R. Tolkien was talking about the One Ring, but his statement seems true for commas as well. Regardless of their field, students encounter uncertainty when faced with this little punctuation mark. But never fear, some simple guidelines will make you Lord of the Comma.

1. Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, and yet) joining independent clauses.
  - a. “Throw yourself in next time, and rid us of your stupidity!”
  - b. “I can avoid being seen if I wish, but to disappear entirely is a rare gift.”
2. In a series of terms, phrases, or clauses, use a comma after each term except the last.
  - a. Frodo, Sam, or Smeagol
  - b. “You are the luckiest, the canniest, and the most reckless man I ever knew.”
3. Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase. Introductory clauses tell readers when, where, how, or why an action occurred.
  - a. When Gandalf fell, the fellowship sought refuge in Lothlórien.
  - b. Years after Bilbo’s adventure, Frodo inherited the One Ring and stepped into legend.
  - c. In Mordor, Frodo and Sam disguise themselves as orcs.
4. Enclose parenthetical expressions, terms or phrases not essential to your sentence but which give readers more information, between commas.
  - a. “Aragorn was searching, bent towards the ground, among the folds and gullies leading up into the western ridge.”
  - b. Treebeard, a shepherd of the forest, met Merry and Pippin in Fangorn.
5. Use a comma when directly addressing someone or something.
  - a. “Farewell, Aragorn!”
  - b. “This, my friend, is a pint.”
6. When a quotation is followed by an attribution, place a comma within the quotation marks.
  - a. “You have my sword,” vowed Aragorn.
  - b. “Indeed I saw upon the bridge that which haunts our darkest dreams, I saw Durin’s Bane,’ said Gimli in a low voice, and dread was in his eyes.”