



University of Southern Mississippi, Department of History's  
**History Writing Lab**



464 Liberal Arts Building, 601-266-4086,  
[historywritinglab.usm@gmail.com](mailto:historywritinglab.usm@gmail.com)

<http://www.usm.edu/history/writinglab.html>

---

### **The Comma\***

In spite of the comma's reputation as the second most feared item of punctuation (after the dreaded semi-colon), their main purpose is to make sentences easier to read and understand. Commas are most commonly used:

#### **To enclose parenthetical expressions**

"The Erie Canal, along with many other internal improvements, was built during the Jacksonian Era."

#### **To enclose a name or title in direct address**

"Excuse me, Professor, but I missed your point about the importance of the Erie Canal."

#### **After abbreviations**

"Carol Sheriff, Ph.D., wrote *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862.*"

#### **To set off non-restrictive elements (i.e. words, phrases, or clauses that modify a word whose meaning is already clear)**

"A celebrated politician, DeWitt Clinton was a canal supporter."

"This book describes the life of Peter Ploughshare, an opponent of the Grand Canal."

"The canal commissioners, all sporting their best attire, looked ready to do business."

**\*\*Note:** A *restrictive* element is a modifier that is necessary to preserve the intended meaning of the sentence. For example, "The commissioners *who wore their best suits* looked businesslike" requires no commas because it is necessary to know which commissioners looked businesslike.

#### **In a list**

"The canal boat was full of corn, cows, chickens, and cotton."

**\*\*Note:** The serial comma after the term 'chickens,' before the conjunction 'and,' is the correct form.

#### **Before a conjunction (and, but, nor, or, for, so, yet) joining two independent clauses**

"The Hudson River was always an important waterway, but its prestige grew after the opening of the great western canal."

#### **After an introductory phrase or clause that precedes an independent clause**

"Before you conclude your essay, I think you should take into consideration the impact the Erie Canal had on the Civil War."

"In 1825, the Erie Canal opened to great fanfare."

#### **To indicate tags and interjection**

"Yes, I came here via the artificial river."

"Well, actually, I left the supplies in Lockport."

"You know that the Erie Canal was responsible for America's becoming a superpower, don't you?"