CHEAT SHEET 01

COMMAS CHEAT SHEET

EXTRA INFO EDITION • THE NONESSENTIALS

EASY POINTS ALERT
5 ACT
2–4 SAT
questions per test

ALWAYS
ADD COMMAS
around non-essential words/phrases

ALWAYS
REMOVE COMMAS
around essential words/phrases

THE TEA: ACT/SAT love to mess with you on extra info: side notes, nicknames, "by the way" stuff. They'll ghost commas you actually need or slap commas around essential info just to catch you slippin'. Your job? Spot the **flavor** vs. the **main course**. **Mark the extras, protect the essentials.**

QUICK HACK
MENTALLY YEET THE PHRASE. DOES THE SENTENCE STILL SLAP?

YES
Sentence still works → **commas belong.**

NOPE
Sentence changes meaning → **leave commas chillin',** don't touch.

RULE 1 WRAP THE EXTRAS IN COMMAS

WHAT IT MEANS

Extra info = bonus flavor, not the main point.

QUICK TEST

Take the phrase out. Does it make sense?

YES Commas belong.

NOPE Leave the commas out.

EXAMPLE

"My dog, a giant fluffball, loves belly rubs."

HERE'S THE TEA: COMMAS ARE NEEDED

- **Main idea (clause):** "My dog loves belly rubs."
- **Extra flavor:** "a giant fluffball" renames/describes the dog, but you don't need it to know which dog. (It doesn't turn your dog into a new dog if you remove it, FR, right?)

WHY COMMAS MATTER

NOPE **"My dog a giant fluffball loves belly rubs."**

- Looks like a word salad and makes "a giant fluffball" sound essential, when it's just bonus cuteness.
- Reads like a hot mess. Can you peep that extra flavor? Yup, so add in those commas!

RULE OF THUMB Wrap nicknames, side notes, and extra descriptions in commas.

COMMAS: EXTRA INFO

CHEAT SHEET 01

RULE 2 Names + Side Deets (AKA Appositives)

WHAT IT MEANS

Sometimes a sentence drops in extra info about a person, place, or thing, like a nickname or a "by the way" detail. Think of it as a tiny baby interruption in your sentence.

QUICK TEST

Remove the extra info. Does it make sense?

YES Commas belong.

NOPE It's essential, leave them out.

EXAMPLE

"The P.E. teacher, Ms. Kristen, blows her whistle—hard."

HERE'S THE TEA: COMMAS ARE NEEDED

- **Main noun:** "The P.E. teacher"
- **Side deet (appositive):** "Ms. Kristen" renames the teacher, but we'd still know who we're talking about without it.

WHY COMMAS MATTER

NOPE **"The P.E. teacher Ms. Kristen blows her whistle—hard."**

- Feels like you need the name to know which teacher. Nope!
- The name *seems* essential, even though it's just bonus flavor.

RULE OF THUMB Drop in nicknames, names, or extra details that aren't essential? Wrap them in commas. Think of commas as **bubble wrap** for your bonus info.

RULE 3 Don't Comma Essential Info

WHAT IT MEANS

Some info is **mission-critical**: you need it to know exactly what the sentence is talking about. Don't slap commas around it, or you'll confuse the reader.

QUICK TEST

Does the sentence still make sense exactly as intended without that info?

YES Still works → commas okay.

NOPE It changes meaning → essential → no commas.

EXAMPLE

"Somewhere in the distance, a single facepalm echoes."

HERE'S THE TEA: COMMAS ARE NOT NEEDED

- **Essential info:** "in the distance" tells us where the facepalm happens.
- **Extra info?** Hard nope. Everything is needed.

WHY THE EXTRA COMMAS HURT

NOPE **"Somewhere, in the distance, a single facepalm echoes."**

- Makes "in the distance" look like bonus flavor… actually, it's critical to the sentence.

RULE OF THUMB If info is needed to identify the noun or clarify meaning → leave commas out.

COMMAS: EXTRA INFO

CHEAT SHEET 01

Down + Dirty Version

1

READ IT

Read the sentence **and** all the answer choices.

2

YEET THE EXTRA

Mentally yeet the extra-info phrase. **YES** still works → commas belong. **NOPE** → leave commas out.

PRO TIP 1

Scope the **main clause** first; extras just vibe on the side. Yeet the extra, hug the important stuff.

PRO TIP 2

If the word **"however"** shows up, it **ALWAYS** needs to be surrounded by commas.

Tricks test-makers love

TRICK 1

Slapping commas around essential info (trying to catch you slippin').

TRICK 2

Leaving commas off extra info.

TRICK 3

Piling on multiple clauses or adjectives to confuse your brain. Classic flex move.

TRICK 4

When in doubt: **bubble wrap, bubble wrap, bubble wrap!**

Quiz time. Flip the page and spot the extras.

COMMAS: EXTRA INFO

MINI COMMA QUIZ 1 TEST YOURSELF • NON-ESSENTIALS

Q1 TEST TRAP Which is correct?

A The P.E. teacher Ms. Kristen blows her whistle.

B The P.E. teacher, Ms. Kristen blows her whistle.

C The P.E. teacher, Ms. Kristen, blows her whistle.

D The P.E. teacher Ms. Kristen, blows her whistle.

ANSWER: C

WHY? "Ms. Kristen" = extra info (renames "The P.E. teacher") → bubble-wrap it in commas.

Q2 TEST TRAP Which is correct?

A The party which started at 7pm was epic.

B The party, which started at 7pm, was epic.

C The party which, started at 7pm, was epic.

D The party, which started at 7pm was epic.

ANSWER: B

WHY? "Which started at 7pm" is extra deets, not a make-or-break part of the sentence. Commas hug the clause like it's a friend you don't want to lose.

Q3 TEST TRAP Which is punctuated correctly?

A Students who are late, often miss the quiz.

B Students, who are late often miss the quiz

C Students who are late often miss the quiz.

D Students, who are late, often miss the quiz.

ANSWER: C

WHY? "Who are late" = essential → tells us *which* students. No commas allowed. Test-makers love to toss random commas in here to look fancy. Don't fall for it.

COMMAS: EXTRA INFO

Q4 TEST TRAP Which is correct?

A My friend, Alex is a wizard at video games.

B My friend Alex is a wizard at video games.

C My friend, Alex, is a wizard at video games.

D Both B and C, depending on context.

ANSWER: D

WHY? B works if you have more than one friend → "Alex" is essential (identifies which friend). BUT C works if you only have one friend (sorry) → "Alex" is extra detail → wrap it in commas.

Q5 TEST TRAP Which is correct?

A My brother, who lives in Chicago, is visiting next week.

B My brother who lives in Chicago is visiting next week.

ANSWER: Depends!

WHY? **One brother total** → A works (the Chicago detail is extra info). **Multiple brothers** → B works (the Chicago info is essential to know *which* one).

QUICK WINS: LOW EFFORT, HIGH-SCORE POTENTIAL.



CHEAT SHEET 02

COMMAS IN A SERIES

LISTS EDITION • SPOT THE SQUAD

EASY POINTS ALERT
5–10 ACT
3–6 SAT
questions per test

ACT and SAT love to test lists. They want to see if you can line up items correctly, and yes, both tests obsess over the **Oxford comma** (the one before "and" in a list). Commas separate **three or more** items. Skip them only if there are just two. Basically, it's a **"spot the squad"** challenge: every item gets its proper space, every adjective stays in line, and nobody gets left behind.

EASY POINTS ALERT: On ACT English, usually **5–10** questions per test are about commas in lists. On SAT Writing and Language, around **3–6**. Series questions are low-hanging fruit: easy points if you spot the squad members.

RULE 1 Comma Up Your Crew: Lists & Series

WHAT IT MEANS

Each item in a list gets a comma if there are 3+ items. The last item always uses the Oxford comma (before "and"/"or"). Only 2 items? Skip the comma.

QUICK TEST

Mentally yeet one item at a time.

YES Sentence still works → commas belong.

NOPE Sentence falls apart → hold off.

EXAMPLE

Right: "I invited Tina, Mike, and Lucy." Safe, everyone chill. Oxford comma = gold.

THE TRAP, THE HACK, THE CUTE TIP

- **The trap:** test-makers sneak in a list of 2–3 items and leave out the last comma (aka the Oxford comma).
- **Hack:** ask "Is there more than two items?" If yes → Oxford comma ALWAYS for SAT. For ACT, mostly yes, BUT make sure other rules are followed first.
- **Cute tip:** the Oxford comma is your squad's personal bodyguard. It keeps the last item from getting smushed.

WHY IT MATTERS

NOPE **"I invited Tina, Mike and Lucy."**

- The last two merge into one blob.

RULE OF THUMB Straight list of 3+? Every item gets its own comma, Oxford comma included.

COMMAS IN A SERIES

RULE 2 Equal vs. Cumulative Adjectives

WHAT IT MEANS

Test-makers love to throw adjectives into the mix to trick you. Know when a comma is describing a noun vs. when it separates items.

QUICK TEST

"Swap and see if it still slaps."

YES Swap works → equal adjectives → keep the comma.

NOPE Swap breaks → cumulative → no comma.

EXAMPLE

Equal: "energetic, fearless kittens" → swap: "fearless, energetic kittens." Comma needed.

THE TRAP, THE HACK, THE CUTE TIP

- **The trap:** tests throw commas between adjectives that are actually building on each other.
- **Hack:** swap 'em. Works = equal → comma. Breaks = cumulative → no comma.
- **Cute tip:** if adjectives fight when swapped, don't throw a comma. They're like roommates sharing a bed, gotta stick together.

CUMULATIVE EXAMPLE

NOPE **"big red balloon" → swap: "red big balloon" (nope, weird)**

- Swap breaks it, so there's no comma between "big" and "red."

RULE OF THUMB Equal adjectives get a comma. Adjectives that build on each other stay comma-free.

RULE 3 Don't Mix Adjectives + Items

WHAT IT MEANS

Keep adjectives describing the same noun separate from your list items. Don't accidentally split adjectives with commas meant for your squad list.

QUICK TEST

Mentally separate the squads from the adjectives. Commas separate equal adjectives **or** separate squad members.

EXAMPLE

"...energetic, fearless kittens performing unicycle-riding, ballet, and hula hooping..."

THE TRAP AND THE CUTE TIP

- **The trap:** they mash adjectives and list items in one sentence. Students confuse what's a "squad member" and what's a "description."
- **Cute tip:** think of a dance floor. Adjectives dance together, list items dance solo.

WHAT GOES WRONG

NOPE **Missing commas = chaotic mosh pit**

- Commas go between true squad members OR equal adjectives. Only add them if they're separate, equal "items" in a list.

RULE OF THUMB Only add commas if they're separate, equal "items" in a list.

COMMAS IN A SERIES

CHEAT SHEET 02

Down + Dirty Version

1
READ ALOUD
Read the sentence out loud.

2
SPOT ADJECTIVES
Equal? Then comma.

3
SPOT THE LIST
Give every item its own comma + the Oxford comma.

4
SWAP TEST
Swap the adjectives.
YES still works → comma belongs.
NOPE → skip it.

Mini Comma Quiz 2 TEST YOURSELF • SERIES

Q1 **TEST TRAP • OXFORD COMMA TRAP** **What is correctly punctuated?**

- **A** For breakfast, I had eggs, toast and juice.
- **B** For breakfast, I had eggs, toast, and juice.
- **C** For breakfast, I had eggs toast, and juice.
- **D** For breakfast, I had eggs toast and juice.

ANSWER: B

WHY? Kick out anything without the Oxford comma (before "and"). Missing commas = unclear list.

Q2 **TEST TRAP • SNEAKY ADJECTIVES** **Pick the correct sentence.**

- **A** She bought a shiny, red, sports car.
- **B** She bought a shiny red sports car.
- **C** She bought a shiny, red sports car.
- **D** She bought a shiny red, sports car.

ANSWER: B

WHY? Only use commas between adjectives that separately describe the noun ("shiny" + "red" are fine, but "sports car" is a single idea). So no breaking that phrase apart.

COMMAS IN A SERIES

Q3

TEST TRAP • SNEAKY DOUBLE ACTION TRAP **Which is correct?**

A He grabbed his phone, and checked his texts, and sighed.

B He grabbed his phone, checked his texts, and sighed.

C He grabbed his phone, checked his texts and, sighed.

D He grabbed his phone checked his texts, and sighed.

ANSWER: B

WHY? One subject, three moves. A = too many "ands." C = fake comma. D = smushed start.

Q4

TEST TRAP • SNEAKY PHRASES **Which is correct?**

A The club meets on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

B The club meets on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

C The club meets on Mondays, Wednesdays, and, Fridays.

D The club meets on Mondays and, Wed. and Fridays.

ANSWER: A

WHY? Straight-up list of three days. C = extra comma after "and" (always illegal). D chops the rhythm like a bad remix.

Q5

TEST TRAP • LONG PHRASE FAKE-OUT **Which is correct?**

A He bought snacks like chips, cookies, the kind with sprinkles, and soda.

B He bought snacks like chips, cookies the kind with sprinkles, and soda.

C He bought snacks like chips cookies, the kind with sprinkles, and soda.

D He bought snacks like, chips, cookies, the kind with sprinkles, and soda.

ANSWER: A

WHY? Squad check! Each snack gets its own seat at the picnic table. "Cookies, the kind with sprinkles" is one item with a bonus detail, so it stays inside the list. B drops a comma that signals the extra info. C smashes two items together. D misplaces the first comma so hard it looks like a typo.

Time to slay. Grab those easy wins.

CHEAT SHEET 03

MODIFIER CHEAT SHEET

DON'T LET THEM BITE YOU!

EASY POINTS ALERT
10 ACT
6–10 SAT
questions per test

ACT and SAT love to sneak in modifier traps. What's a modifier anyway? A modifier is a word or phrase that gives extra info about something else in the sentence. It can be an adjective (*bright*), an adverb (*quickly*), or a clause/phrase (*running late*). **Signal:** look for words or phrases at the **start of a sentence** or before/after commas that describe something. That's probably a modifier.

NOPE "Running late, the bus left without me."
Ummm, who's running late? Not the bus.

CUTE TIP: modifiers need a **buddy noun**! Dancing solo on the dance floor? Total chaos. Dancing with its BFF (the subject)? Smooth moves all night.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

Extra info chilling at the start of a sentence without a clear buddy noun. **No BFF = chaos.**

NOPE **"While studying, the TV was too loud."**
Who's studying? Not the TV!

YES **"While studying, I noticed the TV was too loud."**

- **Hack:** ask WHO or WHAT this extra info is about. Move that modifier right next to that word. BFFs only!
- **Be aware:** always check the subject. If it's missing, add it!

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A word or phrase hanging out too far from the thing it's describing. Big oops = wrong meaning. Modifiers are clingy: they ONLY belong next to their BFF.

NOPE **"She almost drove her kids to school every day."**
Almost drove what?

YES **"She drove her kids to school almost every day."**

- **Hack:** slide that modifier right next to the word it needs to describe.
- Read it aloud. If it sounds weird, the modifier is misplaced.

MODIFIERS

Comparison Confusion

A comparison modifier = extra info that messes up who's being compared to who.

NOPE **"Maria scored higher than the student who studied the least."**
Wait… higher than who exactly?

YES **"Maria scored higher than any student in her class who studied the least."**

- **Hack:** make sure the modifier clearly points to the right person or thing. Double-check that the better/worse/more/less is obvious.
- **Look for:** ranking (higher, lower, better, worse, older, younger), quantity (more, less, most, least), relative measure (faster, slower, stronger, weaker).
- Spot it early: misplaced comparisons = unclear or silly sentences.

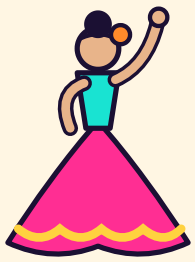
Too Many Modifiers Crammed

Piling way too many adjectives or phrases into a sentence = meaning lost. Keep it clean, keep it clear.

NOPE **"She wore a bright, shiny, sparkly, rainbow-colored, glittery dress."**
Whoa, brain overload!

YES **"She wore a bright, glittery, rainbow-colored dress."**

- **Hack:** break modifiers into manageable chunks. Keep each modifier attached to the word it describes. Dump the fluff.
- **Remember:** modifiers are like dancers on a squad. Each has a spot. Overcrowded dance floor = chaos.



MODIFIERS

CHEAT SHEET 03

Down + Dirty Version

1
READ ALOUD
Sounds weird? Modifier trap.

2
FIND THE EXTRA
Adjectives, adverbs, phrases.

3
ASK WHO
Who/what is this describing?
→ BFF noun.

4
CHECK COMPARISONS
More, less, better, worse, older, faster.

5
TRIM OR SPLIT
Too many modifiers = chaos.

6
SWAP TEST
Move it. Meaning changes? Wrong spot!

Mini Modifier Quiz TEST YOURSELF

Q1 TEST TRAP • DANGLING MODIFIERS **What sentence is correct?**

- **A** Running to catch the bus, my backpack fell off.
- **B** Running to catch the bus, I dropped my backpack.
- **C** My backpack fell off, running to catch the bus.
- **D** Running to catch the bus my backpack fell off.

ANSWER: B

WHY? Dangling modifier alert! “Running to catch the bus” needs a buddy noun, and “I” is the one running. A and D make the backpack the runner. C smushes the clause at the wrong spot.

Q2 TEST TRAP • MISPLACED MODIFIERS **Pick the sentence that makes sense.**

- **A** She almost ate all the cookies in one sitting.
- **B** She ate almost all the cookies in one sitting.
- **C** Almost she ate all the cookies in one sitting.
- **D** She ate all almost the cookies in one sitting.

ANSWER: B

WHY? “Almost” modifies “all the cookies,” not “ate.” A misplaces it, making it sound like she nearly ate but didn’t. C and D = awkward or grammatically wrong.

MODIFIERS

Q3

TEST TRAP • COMPARISON CONFUSION **Which is correct?**

A Jenna scored higher than her friend who studied the least.

B Jenna scored higher than any friend in her class who studied the least.

C Jenna scored higher than her friend, who studied the least.

D Jenna scored higher than her friend who studied least.

ANSWER: B

WHY? Modifiers must clearly point to the right person. “Any friend in her class…” makes the comparison clear. A and D are vague; C changes meaning with the comma.

Q4

TEST TRAP • TOO MANY MODIFIERS **Which sentence is clean and correct?**

A She wore a bright, sparkly, shiny, multicolored, glittery dress.

B She wore a bright, shiny, multicolored dress.

C She wore a bright shiny, sparkly multicolored glittery dress.

D She wore bright shiny multicolored glittery dress.

ANSWER: B

WHY? Overstuffed modifiers = confusing. Trim the extra adjectives and keep each modifier clearly attached to the noun.

Q5

TEST TRAP • SNEAKY MODIFIER PLACEMENT **Pick the right one.**

A While reading the book, the lights were too dim.

B The lights were too dim while reading the book.

C While reading the book, I noticed the lights were too dim.

D While reading, the book lights were too dim.

ANSWER: C

WHY? Dangling alert! The person reading = “I.” A and D make the lights read the book. B = confusing.

Time to slay those modifiers. Spot it, fix it, bank the points.