

# Introductory Adverbial Phrases

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**An introductory phrase or clause that modifies a subsequent verb should (with one exception) be followed by a comma.**

- *When I go to a beauty parlor, I always use the emergency entrance.* —Phyllis Diller
- *In every fat book, there's a thin book trying to get out.* —Unknown
- *If God lived on earth, people would break his windows.* —Jewish proverb
- *If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?* —Abraham Lincoln

**Exception: the phrase (or single adverb) is short and perfectly clear**

- *When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it.* —Clarence Darrow
- *When turkeys mate they think of swans.* —Johnny Carson
- *I don't know anything about music. In my line you don't have to.* —Elvis Presley
- *Presently my soul grew stronger . . .* —Edgar Allan Poe
- *If called by a panther  
Don't anther.* —Ogden Nash

**Exceptions to the exception**

- Use the comma when a short introductory adverbial refers to the whole sentence: *Seriously, I've run out of jokes.*
- Or could be misleading: *Now, I think he lied.* (Compare: *Now I think he lied.*) *To be sure, she seldom spoke. Before shooting, the man in the doorway cried out.*
- Or is a participle (verb-form modifier): *Rising, he staggered. Confused, they wandered.*
- Or is strongly transitional: *However . . . Therefore . . . Meanwhile . . . Hence . . . Also Yet, But, Thus, So, Then, etc.,* when transition is emphasized. *Thus, all survived.* But: *Thus Spake Zarathustra.* (One refers back, the other ahead.)

**Dangling modifiers**

An element introducing a sentence must be clearly tied to the main clause. If not, it is said to dangle. (A comma won't help.) The following sentences could be misleading:

- *Sitting in the back row, the blackboard was blurred.* (*What was sitting?*)
- *The time passed swiftly, eating, drinking, and talking.* (*The time was eating?*)
- *To save stamps, banks encourage use of the Internet.* (*Banks will save stamps?*)

- *When only a child, my father took me hunting. (When who was a child?)*
- *By exercising regularly, your fat will melt away. (Your fat should exercise?)*

But a phrase introducing a general truth is acceptable: *To sum up, germs cause disease.*