Comma in a Compound Sentence

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A sentence is *compound* if it comprises two or more independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction—*and, or, nor, but, yet, for*. A comma should usually precede the conjunction. For example: *The man approached on a white horse, and a large dog walked beside them.* Note how the sentence might read at first sight without the comma: *The man approached on a white horse and a large dog*—with the verb of the first clause seeming to govern the second as well.

This example may be extreme. But the rule applies even where danger of misreading is slight, mainly to lend balance or emphasis:

- *Eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath.*—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream.*

- *I was gratified to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.*—Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi.*

Exceptions:

- The clauses are short or closely connected: *He mixed drinks and she undressed.*

- The sentence starts with an introductory phrase that governs both clauses: *Seeing him draw his gun, I dropped behind the sofa and the woman ran from the room.* A comma before the *and* would disconnect the introductory phrase from the woman's action. This type of sentence should be scanned carefully for readability. Consider: *Seeing him draw his gun, I dropped behind the sofa and the woman, shrieking hysterically, ran from the room.* Better rewrite this one.

Don't confuse the compound sentence with the *complex* sentence, where one verb governs both clauses. *Many magazine editors urge the prospective contributor to read their website before submitting material but usually specify in writers' guides the months in which they accept manuscripts.* The sentence, though long, doesn't require a comma before *but*. A comma, though, may be used judgmentally.

The word *then*, preceded by a comma, can be a coordinating conjunction in a complex but not a compound sentence. *I got up and shaved, then went downstairs.* [Acceptable.] In a compound sentence—where the clauses could stand alone—the use of *then* as a conjunction is viewed as two sentences run together. *I got up and shaved, then I went downstairs.* [Unacceptable. Use a semicolon or a separate sentence.]

Oddly, we are permitted to join *three* independent clauses by commas: *I came, I saw, I conquered.* [Or as someone put it: *Veni, vidi, Visa—I came, I saw, I went shopping.*]

The main thing to remember: Place a comma before a conjunction joining independent clauses, except very short ones.