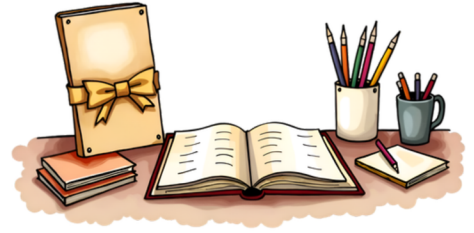




**THE ROMANCE  
WRITER'S  
COMMA  
CHEAT SHEET**

# The Romance Writer's Comma Cheat Sheet

Common comma decisions made simple



## Introductory Elements

**Rule:** Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause that comes before the main sentence.

**Incorrect:** ✗ "With a shaking hand she reached for the letter."

**Correct:** ✓ "With a shaking hand, she reached for the letter he'd left on her doorstep."

✓ "Before she could speak, Callum stepped forward and took her hands in his."

✓ "When the last guest finally left, Marisol allowed herself to cry."

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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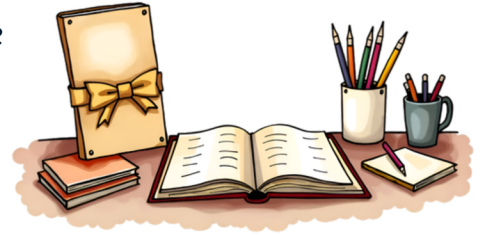
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💡 **Quick Tip:** Short intros (1-2 words like "Finally," or "Slowly,") still get the comma. When in doubt, add it.



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## Dialogue Commas

Rule: Use a comma *before* a dialogue tag. The tag is part of the same sentence as the dialogue.

**Incorrect:** ❌ "I never stopped loving you." she whispered.  
❌ "We need to talk," Declan said. His jaw was tight. (incorrectly split)

**Correct:** ✅ "With a shaking hand, she reached for the letter he'd left on her doorstep."  
✅ "I never stopped loving you," she whispered.  
✅ "We need to talk," Declan said, his jaw tight.

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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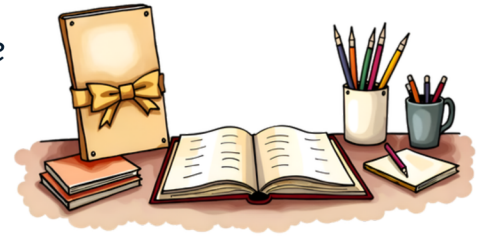
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**Quick Tip:** If you can replace the tag with "said" and it still makes sense, you need a comma, not a period.



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## Compound Sentences (FANBOYS)

**Rule:** When joining two complete sentences with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), use a comma before the conjunction.

**Incorrect:** ✗ *"She wanted to trust him but three years of silence had taught her better."*

**Correct:** ✓ *"She wanted to trust him, but three years of silence had taught her better."*

✓ *"He'd rehearsed this moment a hundred times, yet every word deserted him now."*

✓ *Short clause exception: "He smiled and she melted." (very short— comma optional)*

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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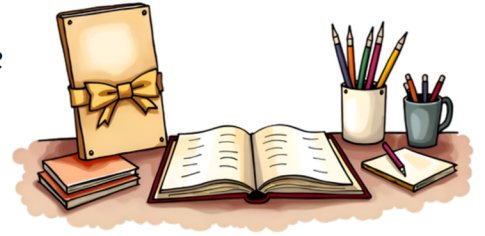


**Quick Tip:** Test it: can each side stand alone as a sentence? If yes, add the comma.



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## Nonessential Phrases

**Rule:** Use commas to set off information that adds detail but isn't necessary to identify the subject or complete the sentence's meaning.

**Incorrect:** ✗ *"Theo who had never once apologized for anything said the words."* (missing commas)

**Correct:** ✓ *"Theo, who had never once apologized for anything, said the words like they cost him everything."*

✓ *"The letter, dated three months ago, had been sitting unopened on his desk."*

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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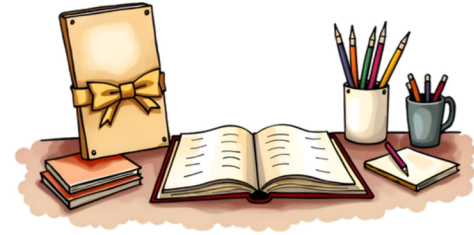
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 **Quick Tip:** Cover the phrase with your thumb. If the sentence still makes sense and the subject is still clear, the phrase is nonessential, so add commas around it.



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Common comma decisions made simple



## ***Direct Address (Vocatives)***

**Rule:** Always use a comma to set off the name or term of address when speaking directly to someone.

**Incorrect:** ✗ "I meant what I said Marisol." (missing comma—changes meaning)

- Correct:**
- ✓ "I meant what I said, Marisol."
  - ✓ "Sera, don't you dare walk out that door."
  - ✓ "Tell me the truth, sweetheart. All of it."

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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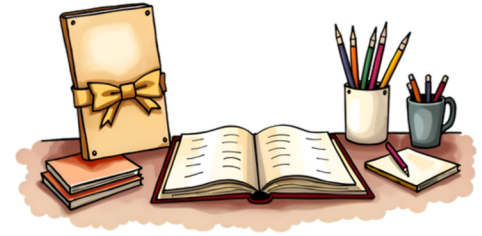
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 **Quick Tip:** This one changes meaning! "Let's eat, Grandma" vs. "Let's eat Grandma." Commas save lives—and romance heroines.



# The Romance Writer's Comma Cheat Sheet

Common comma decisions made simple



## Dialogue Beats vs Tags

Rule: Dialogue tags (said, whispered, asked) connect with a comma. Action beats (she turned, he exhaled) are separate sentences—use a period.

- Incorrect:** ❌ "We should go," She turned toward the door. (comma + capitalized action)  
❌ "We should go." she said. (period before tag)

- Correct:** ✅ TAG: "We should go," she said.  
✅ BEAT: "We should go." She turned toward the door.

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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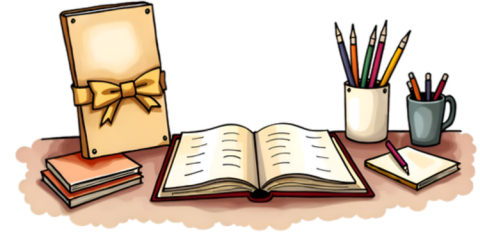
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💡 **Quick Tip:** Is it a speaking verb (said, whispered, murmured)? → comma. A physical action (she smiled, he crossed his arms)? → period.



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Common comma decisions made simple



## Comma vs Em Dash

**Rule:** Both set off extra information, but carry different weight. Commas = smooth, expected. Em dashes = abrupt, dramatic, emphatic—and they're also the go-to for interruptions, whether someone's cut off mid-thought or a beat breaks in.

- Incorrect:**
- ✗ "She'd waited five years, maybe more—for this moment." (mixing comma and em dash to set off the same phrase)
  - ✗ "He stopped, midsentence and looked away." (comma can't carry the abrupt break this moment needs)
  - ✗ "I just wanted to say," "Don't." Callum's voice was flat. "Don't apologize." (a comma can't convey the abrupt cutoff—it reads as a pause, not an interruption)

- Correct:**
- ✓ "She'd waited five years—maybe more—for this moment." (em dash pair, used consistently)
  - ✓ "He stopped midsentence—and looked away." (em dash signals the sudden shift)
  - ✓ "I just wanted to say—" "Don't." Callum's voice was flat. "Don't apologize." (em dash shows the interruption itself)

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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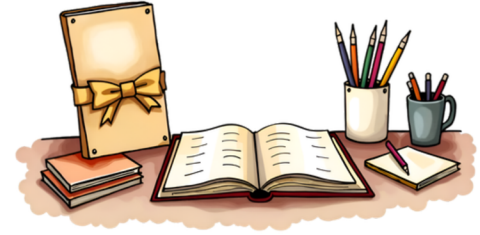
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 **Quick Tip:** In romance, em dashes are your best friend for tension and interruption. But don't overuse them—save them for the moments that hit hardest. And don't let AI paranoia hold you back: em dashes have been a writer's tool for centuries. Using them with intention is a craft choice, not a red flag.



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## Comma vs Semicolon

**Rule:** Use a comma to join two ideas when you also use a conjunction (and, but, or, so, yet).  
Use a semicolon to join two complete sentences that are closely related—no conjunction needed.

**Incorrect:** ✗ "She wanted to tell him, she couldn't find the words." (Comma splice—two full sentences joined only by a comma)

**Correct:** ✓ "She wanted to tell him, but she couldn't find the words." (comma + conjunction)

**Correct:** ✓ "She wanted to tell him; she couldn't find the words." (semicolon joining two complete thoughts)

**Correct:** ✓ "The rain kept falling, but she didn't move from the porch."

**Correct:** ✓ "The rain kept falling; she didn't move from the porch."

**Write some example sentences of your own:**

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 **Quick Tip:** If both sides can stand alone as full sentences, a semicolon works. If only one side can stand alone, use a comma + conjunction instead.



# Notes



# Notes



# Notes



# Thank You!

Thank you so much for grabbing my Romance Writer's Comma Cheat Sheet. I hope it's a resource you find yourself reaching for again and again as you polish your writing. Punctuation doesn't have to be a stumbling block. With a little awareness and the right tools, it becomes second nature.

Speaking of the right tools, if you're ready to take your self-editing even further, I'd love for you to check out the Romance Author Self-Edit Checklist in my Etsy shop. It's designed specifically for romance writers and walks you through a thorough, focused review of your manuscript before it goes to an editor—or out into the world.

As a special thank-you for being here, you can enjoy 20% off with code **GRAMMAR20** at checkout. Just click the link below.

Happy writing—and even happier editing!



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