

# Word for Word

**A useful, clear, fantastic post on commas between  
adjectives**



Scientific writing is full of details that sometimes appear as strings of adjectives, and a comma may seem like a good way to give the reader a little break between them. However, placing a comma between adjectives is not always appropriate.

Commas are used to separate coordinate adjectives, which are two or more adjectives that modify the same noun independently.

**Correct:** Histologic analysis showed strong, specific staining of the marker.

**Correct:** A lobulated, bosselated tumor was visible.

**Correct:** I have baked a flaky, sticky, delicious pastry.

There are two tests to determine whether a pair of adjectives are coordinate: switching them and placing *and* between them. If the sentence still means the same thing with both modifications, then the adjectives are coordinate. Using the first example, we can see that the meaning does not change:

**Correct:** Histologic analysis showed specific, strong staining of the marker.

**Correct:** Histologic analysis showed strong and specific staining of the marker.

On the other hand, noncoordinate adjectives, sometimes called cumulative adjectives, do not modify the same noun independently. In a pair of noncoordinate adjectives, the first adjective modifies the second adjective and the noun as a unit, while the second adjective modifies only the noun.

**Correct:** The patients were enrolled in a randomized clinical trial. (In this sentence, “randomized” modifies “clinical trial”; “clinical” modifies “trial” alone.)

**Correct:** Throw away the rusty bread knife. (Here, “rusty” modifies “bread knife.”)

**Correct:** Several transformative targeted agents have been developed. (“Several” modifies “transformative targeted agents”; “transformative” modifies “targeted agents.”)

Adding a comma between adjectives in the randomized clinical trial sentence is awkward:

**Incorrect:** The patients were enrolled in a randomized, clinical trial.

And the application of the two tests for coordinate adjectives helps make it clear that the adjectives are noncoordinate:

**Incorrect:** The patients were enrolled in a clinical, randomized trial.

**Incorrect:** The patients were enrolled in a randomized and clinical trial.

It is sometimes acceptable to omit a comma between adjectives that might be considered coordinate. *The Copyeditor’s Handbook* has observed:

“The convention of placing a comma between coordinate adjectives seems to be fading, perhaps as part of the trend toward open

punctuation, perhaps because the absence of this comma rarely confuses readers, or perhaps because the distinction between coordinate and noncoordinate adjectives is sometimes hard to apply.”

Nonetheless, a comma that indicates coordinate adjectives when the adjectives are noncoordinate will almost always confuse a careful reader.

## Bibliography

1. Hodges JC, Horner WB, Webb SS, Miller RK. *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook*. 13th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers; 1998:143-144.
2. Einsohn A. *The Copyeditor's Handbook*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; 2000:100-101.

—Sarah Bronson, ELS

Image Credit: [Can Stock Photo / chas53](#)