Correct Comma Use

**Insert commas before coordinating conjunctions for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (fanboys) between two independent clauses.**

- Class was over, so the students went to the bus stop.
- The student asked a question about her writing, and the tutor helped her to answer it.
- School is in session, but the nice weather has caused some students to miss class.

**Separate lists of three or more words, phrases or clauses with commas.**

- Tomorrow I will need my calculator, graph paper, and pencil for the test.
- This weekend I studied, cleaned my apartment, and went out to dinner for a friend’s birthday.

*Semicolons are used in the place of commas when making a list that includes commas within the list: The sister cities of Santa Barbara, California include Toba City, Japan; Yalta, Ukraine; and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.*

**Use commas to separate information.**

Geographical names:
- I was born in Mexico City, Mexico.

Items in dates (except the month and day):
- Americans celebrated the United States’ bicentennial on July 4, 1976.
- This year Independence Day will be on Wednesday, July 4th.

Addresses (except the street number and name):
- Jake lives at 152 Palm Road, Santa Barbara, CA.

Titles with names:
- Larry Trout, Ph.D., will give a presentation today.

**In dialogue or when using a quotation, use a comma to shift between the main discourse and direct speech.**

- The instructor told the students, “Please come to class on time.”
- “Reading to children,” the author of the article writes, “is of greatest importance.”
- In “The Allegory of the Cave” Plato asserts, “In the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort.”
USE CommAS TO SEPARATE EXTRA INFORMATION THAT IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE.

Use a comma before and after extra information that tells you something more about the noun, but is not necessary information (called non-restrictive modifiers):

- I am enjoying my astronomy class, which meets on Mondays and Wednesdays, because we spend some time outside.
- I’m going to a coffee shop with Julia, my older sister, to study for our English Placement Exam.

DO NOT use commas when the information is necessary to understand the meaning (called restrictive modifiers):

- The students who arrived late were marked absent.
- Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” is a popular work in American literature.

COMMAS ARE ALSO USED IN INFORMAL SPEECH AND ASIDES.

With parenthetical expressions:

- I have to get to class, because it’s important that I’m not marked tardy.

To signal a shift in tone, extreme pause, or with a contrasting phrase:

- She doesn’t need more flour to finish the cake, just more sugar.

When adding a question to a sentence:

- “I’m going to the party, aren’t you?”

When using “yes” or “no”:

- “Yes, I’m going.”
- “Sam, don’t forget the snacks.”

INSERT CommAS WHEN USING COORDINATE ADJECTIVES—ADJECTIVES THAT ARE EQUALLY RELATED TO THE NOUN—TO DESCRIBE A NOUN.

Coordinate adjectives “cooperate” in describing a noun:

- Students who graduate from SBCC often have successful, enjoyable careers.
- West Campus has a large, damp lawn.

Non-coordinate adjectives do not require a comma. You can tell you have non-coordinate adjectives if one adjective is more closely related to the noun than the other:

- Many local residents attend the nearby community college.
- Writing Center tutors wear name tags on bright red lanyards.

Use the following questions to test which type of adjectives you are using: If you answer “yes” to either question, you have coordinate adjectives and need a comma between them:

- Can the adjectives be used in reversed order and not change the meaning?
- Does the sentence make sense if you place the word and between the adjectives?
Use commas after introductory information.

- **Clause:**
  Because of all of the services it offers, the CLRC is a popular place on campus.

- **Phrase:**
  For example, at the CLRC students can receive tutoring in a variety of academic subjects and have access to computers to research for or write their papers.

- **Word:**
  Also, the Media Center is a useful part of the CLRC, and houses audio and video resources students need for some courses.

Additional words that might signal an introductory clause: while, although if, instead, when, since, because

Additional phrases commonly used as introductory phrases: as a result, of course, in addition, in other words, for example, on the other hand

Additional introductory words: thus, nonetheless, therefore, conversely, however, also, finally, otherwise, instead

Common Comma Mistakes:

1. Joining two independent clauses with a comma without one of the FANBOYS conjunctions (called a “comma splice”):
   - Incorrect:
     We meet to study every Wednesday, I think it really helps.
   - Correct:
     We meet to study every Wednesday, and I think it really helps.
     We meet to study every Wednesday; I think it really helps.

2. Separating an independent clause from a dependent clause of restrictive information that follows it:
   - Incorrect:
     Maria went to the library, while I finished working.
   - Correct:
     Maria went to the library while I finished working.
     While I finished working, Maria went to the library.

3. Remember: standard American English requires that end punctuation fall within the quotation marks, whether it is a comma or not:
   - “When does it rain here?” he asked.
     “Almost never,” she replied, “but when it does, it pours!”
   - The scholar states, “My results are inconclusive; I have nothing to report.”

As a general guideline:
Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading. If you are still unsure about whether to use a comma or not, try reading the sentence out loud. Put a comma wherever there is a natural pause when reading. And remember: when in doubt, leave it out.
Practice Using Commas

Read the following sentences and insert commas where they belong.

1. Charlotte Brontë writes “I am neither a man nor a woman but an author.”

2. While studying for the exam Felicia drank six cups of coffee!

3. If the school allows the Crazy About Cats club to meet on campus then they must allow the We Dig Dogs club to meet too. However they should meet at different times.

4. Because he didn’t take care of himself Frankie caught a cold this winter.

5. The school has a diverse student population so the cafeteria should serve more international dishes.

Write your own:
With a tutor, or on your own, identify the ways that you commonly misuse commas and practice using them correctly below: think of some of your own sentences to practice using commas correctly, or practice with sentences from essays you are writing for your classes.