Commas

A **comma** is a common form of punctuation used to help separate elements within sentences.

Coordinating Conjunctions

A coordinating conjunction is a word that links words, phrases, or clauses together. These words or **coordinating conjunctions** are ***for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*,** and ***so*.** (The mnemonic devices **FANBOYS** can help you remember these.) Here are some examples of how coordinating conjunctions (i.e., FANBOYS) work:

Words: Everyone needs to feel *wanted* **and** *appreciated.*
Phrases: Mom either left her keys *in the bedroom* **or** *in the kitchen.*
Clauses: *The puppies have been playing in mud,* **so** *they need a bath.*

Always use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that connects two **independent clauses** (e.g. "The puppies have been playing in mud" and "they need a bath"). An independent clause is a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence: it has a subject, a predicate (or main verb), and is a complete thought.

Example: The man was wearing a striped suit, **but** he wasn't wearing a matching tie.

If either of the two clauses is a **dependent clause**, which means it lacks a subject and/or verb and/or complete thought, a comma before the coordinating conjunction is not needed.

Example: The man was wearing a striped suit **but** wasn't wearing a matching tie.

To check your work, read the clauses on either side of the coordinating conjunction separately. If both could stand alone as complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses), put a comma before the conjunction. If not, don't.

Comma Splices

If there isn't a coordinating conjunction between the two independent clauses, using a comma alone causes a **comma splice**, which is a type of **run-on sentence**. Both comma splices and run-on sentences are considered errors in traditional written academic English and should be avoided or corrected.

Example: You wore a fantastic hat today**,** it was fancy.

To correct a comma splice, you have a few options:

- Add a coordinating conjunction (i.e., FANBOYS) after the comma.
  Example: You wore a fantastic hat today, *and* it was fancy.
- Change the comma to a semicolon.
  Example: You wore a fantastic hat today*;* it was fancy.
- Make each clause a separate sentence.
  Example: You wore a fantastic hat today. It was fancy.
- Add a subordinator (*because*, *until*, *if*, etc.), if appropriate.
  Example: You wore a fantastic hat today *because* it was fancy.

Conjunctive Adverbs

Conjunctive adverbs—words like **however**, **therefore**, or **moreover**—separate two independent clauses just like coordinating conjunctions, but they require different punctuation.

If there is an independent clause on both sides of the conjunctive adverbs, you can either use a period to make two separate sentences, or you can use a semicolon after the first complete thought. Either way, there should be a comma after the conjunctive adverb and before the second complete thought.

> **Correct:** Soccer is my favorite sport**. However,** I really excel at basketball.
> **Correct:** Soccer is my favorite sport**; however,** I really excel at basketball.
> **Incorrect:** Soccer is my favorite sport, however I really excel at basketball.
> **Incorrect:** Soccer is my favorite sport, however, I really excel at basketball.

Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

An **introductory word, phrase,** or **clause** comes before the main clause and provides context for the main clause. A **phrase** is a group of related words within a sentence or clause that lacks a complete thought and/or subject with a related verb. Introductory clauses are dependent clauses, meaning they cannot stand alone as sentences because they are missing a subject, verb, and/or complete thought. Using a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause is largely dependent on the audience or discipline, assignment, and author's preferences. However, it is best to use a comma after an introductory element if there is any chance the sentence could be misread or considered confusing.

> **Incorrect (word):** Generally fighting tigers is a bad idea.
> **Correct (word): Generally,** fighting tigers is a bad idea.
>
> **Incorrect (phrase):** At the library I found several useful books.
> **Correct (phrase): At the library,** I found several useful books.
>
> **Incorrect (clause):** Although we went to the store on Tuesday we went to the store today.
> **Correct (clause): Although we went to the store on Tuesday,** we went to the store today.

Lists

Commas are used to separate three or more items in a list or series. The final comma (i.e., the Oxford or serial comma), placed before the conjunction (e.g., *and* or *or*) and last item is strongly recommended to help with clarity. **However, depending on your discipline, audience, and assignment, you may omit this final comma.** For example, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, often used in academics and publishing, strongly encourages the use of the Oxford or serial comma, but *The Associated Press Stylebook*, used for journalistic writing, recommends writers omit the Oxford or serial comma, unless there are issues of clarity.

> **Example (Chicago Style):** You can buy candy, soda, and peanuts at the amusement park.
> **Example (AP Style):** You can buy candy, soda and peanuts at the amusement park.

However, if the items in the list are longer or more complicated, you should always use a comma before the conjunction to avoid ambiguity.

> **Example:** Good friends listen without judging, offer help when it's needed, and always bring out the best in those around them.