Commas

What causes comma problems?

Confusion with commas usually arises when a writer has several ideas jumbled into one sentence. Instead of using periods or commas paired with the proper conjunction, some writers will only use a comma to connect these ideas.

Important terms:

- **Independent Clause**: a clause containing a subject and a verb (at the very least) and can stand alone in a complete sentence.
  - Sally ran.
  - Jim ate cookies.
  - The man went to the store.
- **Dependent/Subordinate Clause:** A clause that cannot stand alone as a complete sentence and (may) begin with a conjunction.
  - /because the monster was coming closer/
  - /although he left/
  - /while Charlie looked/
- **Coordinating Conjunctions:** Words used after a comma to connect two independent clauses.
  - FANBOYS Acronym: **F**or · **A**nd · **N**or · **B**ut · **O**r · **Y**et · **S**o
- **Comma Splice:** When a comma is joining two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction, or with a word that is not a coordinating conjunction.
  - Many scholars dismiss the abominable snowman as a myth, others claim it is a type of ape. à Many scholars dismiss the abominable snowman as a myth, **but** others claim it is a type of ape.
- **Fused (or Run-On) Sentences:** When two independent clauses are put together with nothing to connect them
  - I gave the necessary papers to the police officer then she said I would have to accompany her to the police station, where a counselor would talk to my parents. à I gave the necessary papers to the police officer, **but** then she said I would have to accompany her to the police station, where a counselor would talk to my parents. OR I gave the necessary papers to the police officer. Then, she said I would have to accompany her to the police station, where a counselor would talk to my parents.

When to use commas in a sentence: Commas have many uses in sentences, but certain rules guide their placements and meaning. Most commonly, commas are used to separate things, and to assist the reader in identifying significant parts of the sentence and which words go together.

- **In between two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction**
  - Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction when connecting independent clauses.
  - Example: The athletes are talented, but the coach is incompetent.

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Information gathered from Purdue OWL Extended Rules for Commas.

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- **After introductory words, phrases, and clauses**
  - The comma signals the end of the introductory part of the sentence. The comma goes before the subject and verb of the independent clause.
  - Example: Despite her fear, she jumped into the swirling rapids.
- **To set off a beginning subordinate clause from a following main clause**
  - A comma between a subordinate clause and an independent clause creates a complete thought.
  - Example: Because Paul Revere didn't see the lights, the colonists had no warning.
  - *Note: When a subordinate clause follows a main clause, you will generally not use any punctuation. (Example: The colonists had no warning because Paul Revere didn't see the lights.)
- **To set off a transitional statement or explanation**
  - Commas set off the transitional expression, which connects the ideas together, from the rest of the sentence.
  - Example: Most college students, however, have high stress levels.
- **To separate three or more items in a list**
  - Commas separate items in a series, or "list," and act as natural pauses.
  - Example: The employer was looking for a smart, outgoing, and passionate candidate.
- **Between adjectives that can be reversed and connected with "and"**
  - Example: I drive a slow, ugly, old car.
  - OR: I drive an ugly, old, slow car.
  - OR: I drive a slow, ugly, and old car.
- **Adjectives whose order cannot be changed are generally not separated by a comma.**
  - Example: She lives in a big green house.
  - NOT: She lives in a green big house. (Since the order cannot be changed, a comma isn't needed.)
- **Before or after quotations**
  - Place the comma between a direct quotation and the clause before or after it.
  - Example: When asked what he wanted to purchase at the store, he said, "A new computer."

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