COMMAS
Commas separate the elements of sentences. They give the reader clues in how to read sentences. When used appropriately, commas provide clarity.

Tip: Always read what you write out loud. By listening carefully to your voice, you can often hear the pauses where commas should be, or the choppy breaks where they shouldn’t.

SEPARATE TWO MAIN CLAUSES
Use a comma to separate two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. A main clause is a group of words that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

Common Coordinating Conjunctions
for nor or so
and but yet

Tip: Use the acronym FANBOYS to remember the coordinating conjunctions.

Examples: I wanted to go. I didn’t have enough money.
I wanted to go, but I didn’t have enough money.
I was hired for the job. I start work Monday.
I was hired for the job, and I start work Monday.

AFTER INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS
Use a comma after introductory elements. Introductory elements can be words or phrases.

Examples: Hesitantly, she handed Mr. Bah her school ID card.
Before noon, Michael only drinks coffee.
Above all, consider the consequences before making a decision.
SENTENCE WITH TWO CLAUSES
When a sentence with two clauses begins with a word or phrase such as when, since, while, as, because, even though, etc., add a comma after the first clause.

Examples: He was greeted with thunderous applause when he gave his speech.
When he gave his speech, he was greeted with thunderous applause.
You should get a decent grade as long as you do good work.
As long as you do good work, you should get a decent grade.

NON-ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS
Use commas to set non-essential elements off in a sentence. Nonessential elements add details to the sentence but are not necessary to its meaning.

Example: Jaws, which is about killer sharks, was written by Peter Benchley.

Omit the nonessential elements between the commas, and the sentence reads: Jaws was written by Peter Benchley. The main idea of the original sentence still stands.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS
Because they are crucial to the meaning of the sentence, do NOT use commas to set off essential elements.

Examples: Incorrect: All students, who come to the Writing Center, receive help with their papers.
Correct: All students who come to the Writing Center receive help with their papers.

Omit the text between the commas, and the sentence becomes All students receive help with their papers. Essential information—which students—is lost.
BETWEEN A SERIES OF ADJECTIVES
Use commas between a series of adjectives that can be joined by and.

This can be determined by inserting and where the comma should go. If it makes sense, the and is replaced with a comma. If it does not make sense, do not use a comma.

Examples: An expensive well-tailored suit.
Test: An expensive and well-tailored suit. (This makes sense.)
Insert comma: An expensive, well-tailored suit.
A new tennis court.
Test: A new and tennis court (This does not make sense.)
No comma needed: A new tennis court.

SEPARATE THREE OR MORE ITEMS
Use commas to separate three or more items in a series (called the serial, or Oxford comma). While it may not be used in other kinds of writing, the serial comma is proper for academic writing.

Examples: Macy enjoys baseball, basketball, and golf.
Hakim walked into my office, took off his hat, and sat down.

SET OFF INTERRUPTERS
Use commas to set off interrupters, such as names addressed directly, interjections, contrasting elements, and short tag questions.

Examples: Direct address: I am sorry, Mr. Fernandez, for what I have done.
Interjection: I tell you, man, it’s time to get this done!
Contrasting: Adam is a man of experience, not a theorist.
Short tag question: You will try to do the work, won’t you?
SET OFF QUOTATIONS
Use commas to set off quotations, such as she replied, she remarked, he wrote.

Examples: “I was able,” she replied, “to complete the assignment in an hour.”

She remarked, “I did read most of the chapter.”

Note: The comma rests inside the quotation mark of the introductory dialogue.

PREVENT CONFUSION
Use commas to prevent confusion.

Example: I owe my success to my two wives, John Wayne and Kirk Douglas.

I owe my success to my two wives, John Wayne, and Kirk Douglas.

COMMA SPLICES AND RUN-ON SENTENCES

COMMA SPLICE
A comma splice occurs when a comma joins two independent clauses. This can be resolved in one of three ways.

Note: The following examples are based on the incorrect sentence, The painting represents life, the colors represent experiences:

1. Use a comma with a connecting word, such as a coordinating conjunction.
   Example: The painting represents life, and the colors represent experiences.

2. Use a semicolon between the clauses.
   Example: The painting represents life; the colors represent experiences.

3. Make two separate sentences.
   Example: The painting represents life. The colors represent experiences.
RUN-ON SENTENCES
A run-on sentence occurs when two or more independent clauses are not connected by punctuation or a joining word. One way to test this is to read the text aloud; the place where the sentences need to be separated can often be heard.

Run-on sentences can be resolved with the same revisions as comma splices.

Note: The following examples are based on the incorrect sentence, *He failed the test he will have to take it again*:

1. Use a comma with a connecting word, such as a coordinating conjunction.
   
   **Example:** He failed the test, **so** he will have to take it again.

2. Use a semicolon between the clauses.
   
   **Example:** He failed the test; he will have to take it again.

3. Make two separate sentences.
   
   **Example:** He failed the test. He will have to take it again.

CHANGE AN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES INTO A DEPENDENT CLAUSE
A somewhat more advanced solution for comma splices and run-on sentences is to change one of the independent clauses into a dependent clause.

**Example:** *Comma splice with two independent clauses:* Americans endeavored to put the war behind them, they began moving ahead with their lives.

*Dependent clause:* While Americans **endeavored to put the war behind them**, they began moving ahead with their lives.