Comma Rules

Use commas to separate three or more items in a list.
   Keep in mind that items can be nouns, verbs, or adjectives.
   - I need to buy kiwis, coconuts, and limes.
   - This afternoon I’m going to study, work, and babysit.
   - The marbles are bright, colorful, and round.

Use a comma to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause.
   A dependent clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence, while an independent clause can.
   - Whenever I write an essay, I get confused about where to put commas.
   - If the weather is nice tomorrow, I’m going to the park.

   Bear in mind that the independent clause must come first in the sentence if you use a comma. If the independent clause comes first, a comma is not used:
   - I get confused about where to put commas whenever I write an essay.
   - I’m going to the park if the weather is nice tomorrow.

Use a comma to separate two independent clauses when they are joined together by “FANBOYS.”
   Remember, independent clauses are clauses that, alone, form a complete sentence.

   FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So
   - We have to go to the airport soon, for we have a flight to catch.
   - I tripped over a rock, and I fell into a puddle.
   - I do not want ice cream, nor do I want apple pie.
   - He wants to buy a pair of pants, but he has already spent his paycheck.
   - We can drive to the beach, or we can take a bus.
   - It was snowing outside, yet the roads were safe to drive on.
   - The restaurant was inexpensive, so the family ate a lot for dinner.

   Keep in mind that commas come before FANBOYS.
Use commas to separate nonessential elements within a sentence.

Nonessential elements offer information that is not vital to the sentence.

- My mother, who owns a blue truck, drove me to school today.
- Her dog, strangely enough, loves the mailman.
- The modern art at the museum was very ugly. However, the large marble statues were beautifully carved.
- On the one hand, this computer has more features. On the other hand, that computer is less expensive.

Use a comma after an introductory element of a sentence.

An introductory element is a word or phrase that is not an adjective that comes before the subject in a sentence.

- Hello, my name is Steven.
- Yes, the cellphone’s battery is dead.
- No, the marble statue is not modern art.
- Unfortunately, the only coffee left is decaf.

Use a comma to indicate a pause or shift at the end of a sentence.

Note that this can also be a part of the sentence that refers back to the beginning of the sentence.

- It was warm outside, not hot.
- You’re in a good mood today, aren’t you?
- The motorist slammed on his brakes, screaming at the car that cut him off.
- The dog walked down the street happily, waving his tail with joy.

Use commas to set off quotations.

Commas should generally be placed both before and after quotations appear within a sentence.

- “Today is a great day to be outside,” exclaimed the merchant.
- According to Francis Bacon, “knowledge is power.”

There are a few cases when commas should not be paired with quotation marks. For further information on this, see the Quotation Mark Rules sheet.