Writing: Comma Usage
The Ten **Comma**ndments

Use a Comma…

1. **...when independent clauses are joined with a coordinating conjunction.**
    independent clause: a clause that is a complete sentence by itself
    coordinating conjunction: joining words (and, but, yet, for, nor, or, so)
    > **Example:** I like American history, but the dates give me trouble.

    > **NOTE:** If the two independent clauses are closely related thoughts, a semicolon can be used instead of the comma and conjunction.

2. **...when dependent clauses precede independent clauses.**
    dependent clause: a clause that is not a complete sentence by itself because it begins with a subordinating word (when, after, if, since, etc.)
    > **Example:** If you finish your work by five o'clock, you may leave.

    > ### UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
    > If a dependent clause follows an independent clause and ends the sentence, the comma is usually not necessary. (Exception: dependent clauses beginning with conjunctions expressing contrast: although, whereas, etc.)
    > > **Example:** Please do not interrupt while the doctor is speaking.

3. **...after an introductory phrase which is four words or longer.**
    phrase: a group of words without a subject / noun and a verb
    > **Example:** With my car in the shop, I can't drive to the movie.

    > ### UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
    > Do not use a comma if the introductory phrase is followed by a verb.
    > > **Example:** From behind my seat came clouds of cigar smoke.

4. **...to separate items in a series of three or more.**
    series: a list of words, phrase, or clauses
    > **Example:** For his birthday he received a shirt, a tie, and a pair of pants.

    > **NOTE**: If the items in the series already contain commas, use semicolons to separate them.
    > > **Example:** They elected Sue, president; Bill, vice-president; and Tom, treasurer.

5. **...to separate coordinate adjectives preceding a noun.**
    > **Example:** Enclosed is a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

    > ### UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
    > Do not use a comma if the first adjective modifies the combined idea of the second adjective plus the noun.
    > > **Example:** The book was bound in an attractive blue cloth.

    > > **NOTE**: To determine whether to insert a comma, mentally place the word "and" between the adjectives. If the sentence makes sense this way, use the comma.

6. **...to set off non-restrictive elements.**
    non-restrictive element: a clause or phrase that modifies a noun that can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence
    > **Example:** John Smith, who is old enough to vote, should register. (*non-restrictive clause*)
    > Judy, a hopeless romantic, loved to watch *An Affair to Remember*. (*non-restrictive phrase*)

    > ### UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
    > Do not use a comma if the clause is necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence.
    > > **Example:** All persons who are old enough to vote should register.

7.   **...to set off parenthetical words or expressions such as transitions.**
transition: a word or phrase that does not add meaning to the sentence, but acts as a connector between ideas (therefore, on the other hand, however, etc.)
> **Examples:** Nevertheless, her hours are flexible.
> Science, for example, is a difficult subject.

8.   **...to set off expressions that designate the source of a quotation.**
> **Example:** "Tell me, Mary," asked her mother, "did you have a good time?"

UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
> Do not use a comma if a quoted question or exclamation is followed by explanatory words.
> **Example:** "Who is he?" she asked.

> **NOTE:** Do not use a comma if the quotation is introduced by "that" or if the sentence includes more words about the quote.
> **Example:** The writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that "all is vanity."

9.   **...to set off words used in direct address.**
> **Example:** I do not think, Tom, that your dad likes me.

10. **...to set off dates, addresses, and titles.**
> **Example:** On Saturday, December 23, 1946, in a little church at 421 May Street, Mayfield, Illinois, Sarah and James were married.

UNNECESSARY COMMA ALERT!
> Do not use a comma with dates consisting of only the month and the year.
> **Example:** The next L. A. Marathon is in March 2005.

Common Comma Errors

Comma Splice
A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined with only a comma.

> **Example:** The new semester was two weeks underway, I had not yet gone to my classes.

Fused Sentence
A fused sentence occurs when two independent clauses are joined with no punctuation or subordinate connecting word between them.

How to fix these:
1. Use a period to make two sentences.
    ✐ The new semester was two weeks underway. I had not yet gone to my classes.
2. Use a semicolon between the clauses.
    ✐ The new semester was two weeks underway; I had not yet gone to my classes.
3. Separate the clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction.
    ✐ The new semester was two weeks underway, but I had not yet gone to my classes.
4. Create one independent clause.
    ✐ I had not yet gone to my classes two weeks into the semester.
5. Revise a clause to make it dependent by adding a subordinating conjunction.
    ✐ Although the new semester was two weeks underway, I had not yet gone to my classes.
    ✐ I had not yet gone to my classes even though the new semester was two weeks underway.

EXTRA POINT!

Fragment
A fragment occurs when a period is placed at the end of a dependent clause or a phrase.

> **Example:** After she went to school.

How to fix it:
1. Make the clause or phrase a complete sentence by checking for a subject and verb and taking off any subordinate conjunctions.
    ✐ She went to school.
2. Add or attach an independent clause.
    ✐After she went to school, she walked home.