Six Comma Rules Guaranteed to Change Your Life

Knowing these six comma rules will serve you well in about 90-95% of all comma-related crimes (especially those horrible comma drive-bys). Just by learning these six, you can avoid most comma mishaps, lower your comma insurance rate, increase the life of your pencil’s eraser, and save your instructor’s red ink.

1. Place a comma between each item of a list and before the coordinate conjunction — for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so — preceding the last item.

   Examples:
   o Mary paints, David dreams, and Alice hangs out at the local mall.
   o We had ice cream, cake, and cookies for lunch.
   o Do you want a book, a pencil, or a book bag for your birthday?

2. Place a comma where an introductory expression joins an independent clause. Introductory expressions can be prepositional phrases or single words. (To tell if we have an introductory expression on our hands, we can take it off the front and put it on the back of the sentence. If it still makes sense, it’s an introductory expression.)

   Examples:
   o After the game on Saturday, we plan to go shopping. We plan to go shopping after the game on Saturday.
   o However, I may have to leave early. I may have to leave early, however.

3. Place commas around nonessential information. (We can think of the commas as little handles to pick the information up and remove it. If the basic idea of the sentence remains the same without the information, the commas are right where they should be.)

   Examples:
   o Ray, a part-time aviator, likes video games.
   o I need, by the way, two more volunteers.
   o Stephen King’s book *The Shining* is very scary.
   o Students who do their homework make good grades.

   Why are there no commas in the second two sentences? If we removed the title of King’s book, which of his books would be scary? By removing the title, we will have changed the basic meaning of the sentence. What if we put commas around “who do their homework”? If we leave out that clause, the sentence will read “Students make good grades.” That does not quite express the same meaning, does it?
4. Place a comma before the FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) if they join two complete sentences. FANBOYS = coordinate conjunctions.

Examples:
- The dog barked, and the boy ran home to his cave.
- I’m going home now, so I won’t be here in one hour.
- The little girl dropped her ice cream and cried.

*Why is there no comma in the last sentence? There is no subject after the “and.” FANBOYS must join two complete sentences to deserve a comma.*

5. Place a comma after a dependent clause that comes at the beginning of a sentence. Dependent clauses are formed with subordinating conjunctions, such as because. The comma separates the introductory dependent clause from the independent clause. A comma is not necessary before a dependent clause that comes at the end of a sentence.

Examples:
- Because I was away on business, I didn’t hear the robber break in.
- Although I am only part of the way through the book, I already love it.
- I didn’t hear the robber because I was away on business.

*Why is there no comma in front of “because” in the last sentence? Always remember that we use the comma after the dependent clause when the dependent clause comes at the beginning of the sentence. In a complex sentence, we may need more than one comma. Why?*

Example: Because I was away on business, I didn’t hear the robber break in, and since we have no burglar alarm, she was able to take all of our valuables.

5. Place commas around the name of someone whom you’re addressing directly, after the “yes” or “no” which may begin a sentence, or where a statement ends and a question begins in the same sentence.

Examples:
- I didn’t know, Andrea, that your brother is in Alaska.
- I didn’t know that your brother is in Alaska, Andrea.
- Yes, we have two new puppies at our house.
- No, I don’t think the puppies will bite you.
- It’s cold today, isn’t it?
- You’ve already seen this awful movie, haven’t you?