Commas are notoriously difficult to use correctly. Although the usage of commas varies depending on the discipline, this handout will present a few basic rules that apply in most situations.

Coordinating Conjunctions
A coordinating conjunction is a word that links words, phrases, or clauses together. These coordinating conjunctions are: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. (The mnemonic devices FANBOYS can help you remember these.) Here are some examples of how coordinating conjunctions (i.e., FANBOYS) work:

**Words:** Everyone needs to feel wanted and appreciated.
**Phrases:** Mom either left her keys in the bedroom or in the kitchen.
**Clauses:** The puppies have been playing in mud, so they need a bath.

Always use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses (e.g., “The puppies have been playing in mud” and “they need a bath”). An independent clause is a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence: it has a subject, a verb, and is a complete thought.

**Example:** The man was wearing a striped suit, but he wasn’t wearing a matching tie.

If either of the two clauses is a dependent clause, which means it lacks a subject and/or verb and/or complete thought, a comma before the coordinating conjunction is not needed.

**Example:** The man was wearing a striped suit but wasn’t wearing a matching tie.

To check your work, read the clauses on either side of the coordinating conjunction separately. If both could stand alone as complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses), put a comma before the conjunction. If not, don’t.

Comma Splices
If there isn’t a coordinating conjunction between the two independent clauses, using a comma alone causes a comma splice, which is a type of run-on sentence. Both comma splices and run-on sentences are considered errors in traditional written academic English and should be avoided or corrected.

**Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today, it was fancy.

To correct a comma splice, you have a few options:
- Add a coordinating conjunction (i.e., FANBOYS) after the comma.
  **Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today, and it was fancy.
- Change the comma to a semicolon.
  **Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today; it was fancy.
- Make each clause a separate sentence.
  **Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today. It was fancy.
- Add a subordinator (because, until, if, etc.), if appropriate.
  **Example:** You wore a fantastic hat today because it was fancy.
Conjunctive Adverbs

Conjunctive adverbs—words like however, therefore, or moreover—separate two independent clauses just like coordinating conjunctions, but they require different punctuation.

If there is an independent clause on both sides of the conjunctive adverbs, you can either use a period to make two separate sentences, or you can use a semicolon after the first complete thought. Either way, there should be a comma after the conjunctive adverb and before the second complete thought.

Correct: Soccer is my favorite sport. However, I really excel at basketball.
Correct: Soccer is my favorite sport; however, I really excel at basketball.
Incorrect: Soccer is my favorite sport, however I really excel at basketball.
Incorrect: Soccer is my favorite sport, however, I really excel at basketball.

Introductory Words, Phrases, or Clauses

An introductory word, phrase, or clause comes before the main clause and provides context for the main clause. A phrase is a group of related words within a sentence or clause that lacks a complete thought and/or subject with a related verb. Introductory clauses are dependent clauses, meaning they cannot stand alone as sentences because they are missing a subject, verb, and/or complete thought. Using a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause is largely dependent on the audience or discipline, assignment, and author’s preferences. However, it is best to use a comma after an introductory element if there is any chance the sentence could be misread or considered confusing.

Incorrect (word): Generally fighting tigers is a bad idea.
Correct (word): Generally, fighting tigers is a bad idea.

Incorrect (phrase): At the library I found several useful books.
Correct (phrase): At the library, I found several useful books.

Incorrect (clause): Although we went to the store on Tuesday we went to the store today.
Correct (clause): Although we went to the store on Tuesday, we went to the store today.

Lists

Commas are used to separate three or more items in a list or series. The final comma (i.e., the Oxford or serial comma), placed before the conjunction (e.g., and or or) and last item is strongly recommended to help with clarity. However, depending on your discipline, audience, and assignment, you may omit this final comma. For example, The Chicago Manual of Style, often used in academics and publishing, strongly encourages the use of the Oxford or serial comma, but The Associated Press Stylebook, used for journalistic writing, recommends writers omit the Oxford or serial comma, unless there are issues of clarity.

Example (Chicago Style): You can buy candy, soda, and peanuts at the amusement park.
Example (AP Style): You can buy candy, soda and peanuts at the amusement park.

However, if the items in the list are longer or more complicated, you should always use a comma before the conjunction to avoid ambiguity.

Example: A good friend listens without judging, offers help when it’s needed, and always brings out the best in those around them.