Punctuation: Commas

1. Use a comma between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Examples: My big dog is an Australian Shepherd, and my small dog is a Cocker Spaniel.
Chaucer chases the ball, but Foster always picks it up first.
My dogs hate baths, yet they love playing in the sprinkler.

Take Note: Know the difference between independent clauses and a subject with a compound verb.

Examples: The cat raced through the house and immediately ran out the front door.
I carefully prepared the dogs’ dinner but got distracted before feeding them.

2. Use a comma between an independent clause and a dependent clause only when the dependent clause comes first.

Examples: Because I enjoy chocolate, I bake cookies with extra chocolate chips.
I bake cookies with extra chocolate chips because I enjoy chocolate.

3. Use a comma between a long introductory phrase and an independent clause.

Examples: After we finish the assignment for today, you may leave the classroom.
With more important obligations to attend to, Jennifer and Lindsey skipped the wedding.

Take Note: There’s no hard and fast rule about how many words are in a long introductory phrase.
A good rule of thumb is to always use a comma if the introductory phrase has more than
6 words, never use a comma if the introductory phrase has fewer than 4 words, and use a
comma if needed for clarity when the introductory phrase has 4-6 words.

Examples: In 2006 I graduated from high school.
At my freshman orientation I felt excited and overwhelmed.
Before putting everything in the closet, I realized I had brought too many shoes.

4. Use a comma to separate items in a series.

Examples: Joe realized that he had forgotten his keys, cash, and ID card.
The girls are like sisters—laughing one minute, fighting the next, making up immediately.
Eat right, exercise often, study hard, and go to bed early.

5. Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not linked by a coordinating conjunction.

Examples: Monday was a long, hot, tiring day.
A cool, refreshing drink would help my dry, scratchy throat.

Take Note: Not all adjectives are coordinate adjectives, so use the following tests to determine
whether a comma is needed. If the answer is yes, the adjectives are coordinate.
1. Could you add the word “and” between the adjectives?
2. Could you change the order of the adjectives?

Examples: The sweet little girl gave her friend a pretty sugar cookie.
His new black car impressed everyone in the neighborhood.
The red brick wall was covered with graffiti.
6. Use commas to indicate a non-restrictive clause. Commas are not needed for restrictive clauses.

Non-Restrictive: Jason, who was Lane’s roommate last year, went home to Ohio.
    PLNU, which was not my first choice, has been the perfect place for me.
    I’m going to call Kara, who wrote down the homework assignment for Tuesday.

Restrictive: Students who fail to attend class will receive poor grades.
    Why don’t you speak to the man who witnessed the car accident?

7. Use commas to set off an appositive phrase.

Examples: We were so glad to see Crystal, a friend of ours.
    Lloyd, a frequent golfer, excelled in the tournament.

8. Use commas to set off a parenthetical phrase.

Examples: Coffee, you may have noticed, makes me incredibly anxious.
    We both love to eat barbequed food; Phil’s Cafe, then, is a great place to meet.
    Jenna, for example, is a close friend who is engaged to be married.

9. Use commas to set off a participial phrase.

A participial phrase is a group of words that includes a participle and functions as an adjective, modifying a noun or pronoun.

Examples: Sensing my hesitation, Lacey changed the subject.
    Annette, having been an athlete, understood the implications of a serious injury.

A few general rules:

1. Use a comma if clarity demands it. This rule should not serve as a free pass to overuse commas.

2. Use a comma after a transitional phrase.
   Example: By the way, I haven’t been to the grocery store yet.

3. Use a comma near the beginning of a sentence after such words as “Well,” “Yes,” or “No.”

4. Use a comma to separate contrasting elements.
   Example: Eating double chocolate brownies should be a special treat, not a habit.