Writing Tip #1

Five Rules of Commas

Introduction
Comma usage is often cited as one of the most confusing and frustrating elements of writing. The good news, however, is that the rules of comma usage are really quite simple and very consistent. There are only five main rules to remember, and, with a little practice, you'll never be confused about them again.

1. Dates and addresses
Always use commas after the date and after the year.

   On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

Always use commas after the city and after the state in an address.

   Portland, Oregon, is much larger than Portland, Maine.

2. Introductory words and phrases
Use a comma after a word, phrase or clause that introduces an independent sentence.

   Although I was tired, I did not go to bed until 3:00 a.m.

   However, I woke up at 7:00 a.m. to get ready for work.

   To understand comma rules, you must practice their use.

3. Independent clauses separated by a coordinating conjunction
There are seven coordination conjunctions in English. They’re easy to remember with the acronym F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

Each time you use one of those seven conjunctions, look at the clause before and after it. If
both clauses are independent (i.e., they could both stand alone as complete sentences), then you must use a comma. If one of the clauses is not independent (e.g., the subject comes from the first clause), then you should not use a comma:

1) These examples need commas:

Georgia has great peaches, but peaches host terrible parasites.

Georgia has great peaches, yet peaches host terrible parasites.

2) These examples do not use commas:

Peaches are great but host terrible parasites.

Peaches are great yet host terrible parasites.

The second clause cannot stand alone because it has the same subject as the first clause: peaches.

A non-restrictive element is information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use commas on both sides of a non-restrictive element.

Jake Holmes, my accountant, fixed my taxes last year.

The football coach, who won a state championship last year, is retiring.

The teacher assigned reading, which is really boring, that I have to complete by tomorrow.

We can remove the element between the commas and still understand the meaning of the sentence.

Do not use commas on either side of a restrictive element. A restrictive element is information that is vital to defining who or what the subject is.

Students who fail their exams must forfeit their scholarships.

Football players who commit crimes will be suspended from the team.

The team that won the championship will get the trophy.
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Not all students forfeit their scholarships, only those who fail their exams. Not all football players will be suspended, only those who commit crimes. These elements are essential to the meaning of the sentence.

5. Series of 3 or more items
Use a comma between the elements of a list, including before and and or.

Football, basketball, and volleyball players have to travel to their games.

Would you rather go fishing, hiking, or boating?

You Try It
Look at the quotes below. See if you can insert commas where they belong. Visit the Writing Studio if you have questions.

1. Words are also actions and actions are a kind of words.—Ralph Waldo Emerson

2. I admit it is more fun to punt than to be punted and a desire to have all the fun is nine-tenths of the law of chivalry.—Dorothy L. Sayers

3. He gets at the substance of the book directly he tears out the heart of it.—Mary Knowles

4. It’s not enough to be Hungarian you have to have talent too.—Alexander Korda

5. He was dull in a new way and that made people think that he was great.—Samuel Johnson

6. When angry count to a hundred when very angry swear.—Mark Twain

7. Common sense is the knack of seeing things as they are and doing things as they ought to be done.
—Harriet Beecher Stowe

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