ELEVEN BASIC RULES FOR USING “COMMAS”

Rule 1: Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by any of these seven coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, nor, so, yet.

Lili was bright and helpful, so I offered her a full-time job at my store.

The student explained her question, yet the instructor still did not seem to understand.

You may omit commas before the conjunction if one or both independent clauses are short.

Lucy loves to dance but I don’t.

Rule 2: Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that before the main clause.

After surviving this ordeal, the trapper felt relieved.

If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.

Rule 3: Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, (prepositional) and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

In preparing your annual report to the board of directors, be sure to include predictions for next year’s sales.

Vests, which I believe, have been out of vogue for several years.

Rule 4: Do not use commas to set off essential elements of the sentence, such as clauses beginning with that (relative clauses). That clauses after nouns are always essential. That clauses following a verb expressing mental action are always essential.

The book that I borrowed from you is excellent.

Rule 5: Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

Rule 6: Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives that describe the same noun. Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself or to use commas with non-coordinate adjectives.

He was a difficult, stubborn child. (coordinate)

They lived in a white frame house. (non-coordinate)
Rule 7: Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate contrasted coordinate elements or to indicate a distinct pause or shift.

   He was merely ignorant, not stupid.

Rule 8: Use commas to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer back to the beginning or middle of the sentence. Such phrases are free modifiers that can be placed anywhere in the sentence without causing confusing.

   Nancy waved enthusiastically at the docking ship, laughing joyously.

   Laughing joyously, Lisa waved at Nancy.

Rule 9: Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

   Rachel B. Lake, MD, will be the principal speaker.

   July 22, 1959, was a momentous day in his life.

If you use just the month and the year, no comma is necessary after the month or year:

   The average temperatures for July 1988 are the highest on record for that month.

Rule 10: Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

   John said with emotion, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

   “I was able,” she answered, “to complete the assignment.”

Rule 11: Use commas wherever necessary to prevent possible confusion or misreading.

   To George, Harrison had been a sort of idol.

Note: These rules are from the Purdue OWL web site. They can also be found in the MLA Handbook. OWL also offers question and answer exercises to enhance your knowledge and improve your writing skills in all phases of grammar, punctuation and parts of speech.