29.1 USING COMMAS WITH CONJUNCTIONS

1. Use a comma before a conjunction (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) linking two independent clauses:

   Canadians watch America closely, but most Americans know little about Canada.

   The prospectors hoped to find gold on the rocky slopes of the Sierra Madre, so they set out eagerly.

   Cowards never started on the long trek west, and the weak died along the way.

2. Use a comma before a conjunction linking the last two items in a series:

   She loved life, liberty, and the happiness of being pursued.

For more on conjunctions, see 15.2 and 15.3. For more on punctuating items in a series, see 29.7.

29.2 MISUSING COMMAS WITH CONJUNCTIONS

1. Do not use a comma before a conjunction within a series of just two items:

   ▶ The manager was genial but shrewd.

   ▶ She checked my weekly sales and asked to speak with me.
EXCEPTION: You may use a comma to set off a contrasting phrase:

She liked running her own business, but not working on weekends.

2. Do not use a comma after a conjunction:

- The speaker coughed, studied his notes, and frowned.
- He was scheduled to discuss Rembrandt. But the notes treated the etchings of Picasso.

EXCEPTION: Use a pair of commas after a conjunction to set off a word, phrase, or clause:

But, he sadly realized, the notes treated the etchings of Picasso.
29.3 MISUSING COMMAS BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES: THE COMMA SPLICE

Do not use a comma alone between two independent clauses:

- The beams have rotted, they can no longer support the roof.
- [or] The beams have rotted, they can no longer support the roof.
- [or] The beams have rotted, they can no longer support the roof.

For a full discussion of the comma splice, see 15.6.

29.4 USING COMMAS AFTER INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS

1. Use a comma after an introductory clause, phrase, or word:
   - Whenever it rains hard, the roof leaks.
   - To stop the leak, we have been replacing old shingles with new ones.
   - Unfortunately, last night’s thunderstorm showed us that we still have more work to do.

2. Use a comma after a conjunctive adverb at the beginning of a sentence or clause:
   - The kitchen was drenched; in fact, an inch of water covered the floor.
   - Nevertheless, the living room remained dry.

For more on conjunctive adverbs, see 15.5.

**Exception:** To accelerate the pace of their sentences, writers sometimes skip the comma after an introductory adverb or short introductory phrase:

- Today students protest individually rather than in concert.
  —Caroline Bird

- Throughout the 1930s the number of addicts remained about the same in both England and the United States.
  —Edward Bunker
29.5 USING CommAS WITH NONRESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS

Use a comma or a pair of commas to set off nonrestrictive elements: words, phrases, and clauses that are not essential to the meaning of the sentences in which they appear. Compare these two sentences:

Anyone who publishes a book at the age of six must be remarkable. (restrictive)

Dorothy Straight of Washington, D.C., who published her first book at the age of six, was a remarkable child. (nonrestrictive)
In the first sentence, the *who* clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence because it restricts the meaning of *anyone* to a certain person. The clause tells *which one* is remarkable. In the second sentence, the *who* clause is nonrestrictive and nonessential because it does not identify *Dorothy Straight*. She has already been identified by her name.

Now compare these two sentences:

At the microphone stood a man *wearing a green suit*. (restrictive)

At the microphone stood the master of ceremonies, *wearing a green suit*.

(nonrestrictive)

In the first sentence, the italicized phrase is restrictive because it identifies *a man*. In the second sentence, the italicized phrase is nonrestrictive because the man has already been identified by his title. The italicized phrase just adds further information about him.

The distinction between restrictive and nonrestrictive is commonly applied to adjective clauses, such as *who publishes a book at the age of six*, and participle phrases, such as *wearing a green suit*. Broadly speaking, however, nonrestrictive elements include anything that supplements the basic meaning of the sentence, anything not essential to that meaning. Here are further examples:

The surgeon, *her hands moving deftly*, probed the wound.

Fearful, *not confident*, he embarked on his journey.

At midnight, *long after the final out of the game*, the losing manager was still shaking his head in disbelief.

In October of 1987, *however*, stock prices plummeted.

A single comma sets off a nonrestrictive element that comes at the end of the sentence:

The tour includes three days in Toronto, *which must be one of the cleanest cities in the world*.

Celia stood in the wings, *waiting for her cue*.

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29.6 MISUSING COMMAS WITH RESTRICTIVE ELEMENTS

Do not use commas with restrictive elements: with words, phrases, or clauses essential to the meaning of the sentences in which they appear:
The Comma

- All entries postmarked later than July 1 will be discounted.
- Plants that aren’t watered will die.

(Adjective clauses starting with that are always restrictive.)
- No one without a ticket will be admitted.
- Film director François Truffaut died of cancer in 1984.

A name that follows a common noun or noun phrase is restrictive and should not be set off by commas. But when the name comes first, the common noun that follows it is nonrestrictive and should be set off by commas:

François Truffaut, the film director, died of cancer in 1984.
29.7 USING COMMAS WITH COORDINATE ITEMS IN A SERIES

1. Use commas to separate three or more coordinate items in a series:
   
   Maples, oaks, and sycamores have been afflicted.
   
   The leaves shrivel, wither, and fall to the ground before autumn.
   
   Scientists are seeking to learn what is causing the blight, how it enters the trees, and whether it can be halted.

2. Use commas to separate two or more coordinate adjectives modifying the same noun:
   
   A big, old, dilapidated house stood on the corner.
   
   Its owner always spoke in a low, husky voice.

For more help with punctuating items in a series, see 29.1, item 2.

29.8 MISUSING COMMAS WITH COORDINATE ITEMS IN A SERIES

1. Do not use a comma to separate adjectives when they are not coordinate—that is, when they do not modify the same word:
   
   ▶ His deep blue eyes stared at me.

*Deep* modifies *blue*; *blue* modifies *eyes*. Coordinate adjectives can be reversed. A *low, husky* voice can become a *husky, low* voice. But *deep blue eyes* cannot become *blue deep eyes*. 
2. Do not use a comma before a conjunction when there are just two items:

- Her hair was black and long.

(For an exception, see 29.2, item 1.)
Using Commas to Prevent a Misreading

Use a comma when you need one to prevent a misreading of your sentence:

- On the left, walls of sheer ice rose over five thousand feet into the clouds.

Using Commas with Dates, Addresses, Greetings, Names, and Large Numbers

1. Use commas to set off parts of dates and addresses that appear within a sentence:

   On the afternoon of July 1, 1963, the fighting began.
   The return address on the letter was 23 Hockey Street, Lexington, Kentucky 40502.

   **Exception:** Use no comma to separate parts of a date that begins with the day:

   The atomic bomb was first dropped on 6 August 1945.

2. Use commas to set off the names of someone directly addressed in a sentence:

   A few weeks ago, Mr. Taplow, I spoke to you on the telephone about the possibility of a summer job.

3. Use a comma after the greeting in a friendly or informal letter, and after the closing in a letter of any kind:

   Dear Mary,  
   Sincerely,
   Dear Uncle Paul,  
   Yours truly,

4. Use commas to set off titles or degrees after a person’s name:

   Barbara Kane, M.D., delivered the commencement address.

But *Jr.*, *Sr.*, and *III* may be written without commas:

Sammy Davis Jr. started his singing career at age four.
5. Use a comma after the last part of a proper name when the last part comes first:
   Lunt, George D.

6. Use commas to mark groups of three digits in large numbers, counting from the right:
   Antarctica is 5,400,000 square miles of ice-covered land.

29.11 MISUSING COMMAS WITH DATES AND ADDRESSES

1. Do not use a comma to separate the name of the month from the day:
   - October 22
   - 15 May

2. Do not use a comma to separate the name of the month from the year:
   - January 1988
   - 22 April 1939

3. Do not use a comma to separate a street number from the name of the street:
   - 15 Amsterdam Avenue

4. Do not use a comma before a zip code or anywhere else in an address that is written out on an envelope:
   - 24 Mechanic Street
   - 35 Rosemount Avenue
   - Lebanon, NH, 03766
   - Montreal, Que., H3Y3G6
   - Canada

(On the abbreviations used here, see 35.4.)

29.12 USING COMMAS WITH QUOTATION MARKS

For a full discussion of how to use commas with quotation marks, see 32.3.
Using Commas

Generally, use a comma before a conjunction linking independent clauses:

Canadians watch America closely, but most Americans know little about Canada.

Generally, do not use a comma after a conjunction:

The speaker coughed, studied his notes, and frowned.

Do not use a comma alone between two independent clauses:

The beams have rotted; they can no longer support the roof.

Generally, use commas after an introductory item:

Whenever it rains hard, the roof leaks.

Unfortunately, we haven’t yet fixed it.

Use commas with nonrestrictive elements:

Dorothy Straight of Washington, D.C., who published her first book at the age of six, was a remarkable child.

Do not use commas with restrictive elements:

Anyone who publishes a book at the age of six must be remarkable.

Generally, use commas to separate three or more coordinate items in a series:

We played cards, told stories, and sang old songs.

29.13 MISUSING THE COMMA BETWEEN BASIC PARTS OF A SENTENCE

1. Do not use a comma between a subject and its predicate:

   In August, all the members of the Johnson clan gathered for their annual picnic.

   **EXCEPTION:** Use a *pair* of commas to set off a phrase or clause that comes between the subject and the predicate:
In August, all the members of the Johnson clan, from little Susie to ancient Winona, gathered for their annual picnic.

2. Do not use a comma between a verb and its object:

- Altogether we ate forty hamburgers and six big watermelons.

- I don’t know how many ears of corn we consumed.