The real story on commas includes a few rules (yes, rules). But once you understand those rules, many of your comma troubles should disappear! To understand the rules, it is important to know what a complete sentence is. Check the overview box on the back of this page to read about the difference between a sentence, a clause, and a phrase.

- **DO** use a comma when the clauses of a sentence are connected with a conjunction and **could stand by themselves as sentences** (independent clauses).

  She came to class late, so she missed important information.

  **COULD BE A COMPLETE SENTENCE**

  **CONJUNCTION**

  **COULD BE A COMPLETE SENTENCE**

- **DON'T** use a comma if a clause in a sentence whose parts are connected by a conjunction is a **subordinate**, or **dependent**, clause (could not stand alone as a sentence).

  She read her textbook but wonders what she missed.

  **COULD BE A COMPLETE SENTENCE**

  **CONJUNCTION**

  **COULD NOT STAND ALONE**

  **TIP:** To remember your conjunctions, think of “FANBOYS” - for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

- **DO** use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase that begins a sentence.

  After she took her seat, she took out a pen and paper to take notes.

  **DON'T** use a comma when the clause or phrase ends a sentence.

  She was a good listener after she took her seat.

- **DO** use a comma between two adjectives that both describe another word.

  The Professor had a mixture of white, gray, and black hair.
• **DON’T** use a comma when reversing the adjectives would not make sense or would sound awkward.

The Professor wrote in big cursive letters on the chalkboard.

- **DO** use commas to set off portions of a sentence that are not necessary to the meaning.

The Professor, who was born in Frederick, told the students not to miss class.

- **DON’T** use commas when the additional information is necessary to the meaning of the sentence.

The boy who answered the question was happy to get it right.

- **DO** use commas when there are three or more items in a series.

He put his pencils, pens, and markers into his backpack.

- **DON’T** use commas for two items separated with a coordinating conjunction.

He put his pens and pencils in the front pocket.

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**A brief overview of a complete sentence:**

A sentence must have a subject (a person, place, or thing) and a verb (an action), and it must express a complete thought.

The subject performs the verb: *he* runs; *she* sits; *it* sings; *I* think; *he* is.

A clause has a subject and verb combination but may or may not express a complete thought. Examples: *Jean-Claude ate dinner. As LaShawna considered the problem . . .

A phrase is a group of words that are related in meaning, but it does not contain a subject-verb combination. Examples: *the boys in class, Jamal’s favorite movie.*

**Using Commas with Quotations**

Comma placement with quotations should look like this:

- He exclaimed, “I am here.”
- “I am here,” he exclaimed.

Incorrect

**Incorrect**

The boy was hungry, however, he didn’t eat very much.

Correct

The boy was hungry; however, he didn’t eat very much.

*Transitional words and expressions such as “therefore, however, for instance, in addition” are usually set off with commas, BUT BEWARE!

If the words before and after the commas could both stand alone as sentences, you will create a comma splice.

*Note that a semicolon was used to fix the error.*