Comma Guide

Develop Your Comma Capacity
Lacking comma confidence? You’re not the only one! Many of us make comma errors, whether we underuse or overuse them. To help you learn how to use commas, we’ve created a handy, non-exhaustive guide and a list of the most common comma errors people make. Read on for more information!

Getting Started
Before we begin, there are a few grammatical terms to understand:

Restrictive clause: A restrictive clause is a clause that is necessary for a sentence’s meaning. If a restrictive clause were deleted, a sentence’s meaning would change.
   Example: The student who is sitting in front of me is from Edmonton.

Independent clause: An independent clause is a clause that could be its own sentence.
   Example: I talked to my professor while she ate her lunch.

Dependent clause: A dependent clause is a phrase that cannot form a sentence on its own.
   Example: While walking down the street and texting my best friend, I bumped into my ex.

Coordinate conjunction: Coordinate conjunctions are words that connect phrases, words or clauses. Remember them by using the FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) acronym.

A Handy, Non-Exhaustive List of How to Use Commas
1. When joining two independent clauses with a coordinate conjunction (FANBOYS) use a comma.
   I stayed up late writing an essay, and I feel very tired now.

2. Use a comma after a dependent clause that begins a sentence.
   After staying up all night writing an essay, I feel very tired.
3. Use a comma before ‘who’ or ‘which’ if the information is not needed to understand the sentence. If the information is inserted in the middle of a sentence, it should be offset by two commas.
I slept until noon, which was much later than expected. 
My sister Anna, who lives in Ottawa, called me yesterday.

4. Use a comma to introduce dialogue.
The professor said, “There will be no extensions.”

5. Use a comma after interjections
Oh, you bought me a coffee?

6. Use commas to separate items in a list. Also, put a comma before ‘and’.
This is called the Oxford or serial comma.
I wrote essays for my history, social work, and philosophy courses.

7. Follow an introductory adverb with a comma.
Finally, I went to bed and fell asleep.

8. Use a comma to separate two adjectives that modify the same noun as long as their order can be reversed and joined by ‘and’.
I own a fluffy, temperamental cat. (My cat is fluffy and temperamental)

9. Use a comma to show contrast.
Despite studying all week, I failed the exam.

10. Use a comma after i.e. or e.g.
To decrease stress, students practice self-care—i.e., yoga, listening to music, and talking with friends.

Avoid Making These Comma Errors
1. Separating a subject from its verb with a comma
Incorrect: The bag under the table, is Sally’s.
Correct: The bag under the table is Sally’s.

2. Splitting a restrictive clause from the rest of the sentence with commas
Incorrect: The professor, who is teaching our film studies class, used to be a Hollywood screenwriter.
Correct: The professor who is teaching our film studies class used to be a Hollywood screenwriter.
3. **Separating two items that are joined by a coordinate conjunction with a comma**
   Incorrect: I would like to work at either a hospital, or in a long term care setting.  
   Correct: I would like to work at either a hospital or in a long term care setting.

4. **Using a comma after an independent clause that is followed by a dependent clause**
   Incorrect: I got a text from my friend, while I was studying.  
   Correct: I got a text from my friend while I was studying.

5. **Using a comma to separate adjectives that are joined together to modify the same noun**
   Incorrect: Taking a quick, 1 km run is a normal thing for her.  
   Correct: Taking a quick 1 km run is a normal thing for her.

6. **Don’t use a comma to separate two independent clauses; you should use a semicolon in this case**
   Incorrect: Some students like drinking coffee when they study, other students prefer drinking tea.  
   Correct: Some students like drinking coffee when they study; other students prefer drinking tea.

Commas are actually not that hard to use; you just need a little bit of practice to become a comma master!

**References**