Rules of Punctuation

1. Commas

1. Use commas to separate items in a **series of three or more** words, phrases or clauses.

   She likes hiking, kayaking and cycling on vacation.   She *woke up*, *ate breakfast*, and *brushed her teeth*.

   The final comma before the *and* is optional, but may clarify your meaning when the series contains internal conjunctions.   Follow this guideline – when in doubt, leave the comma out.

   Jane decided to study sociology instead of philosophy, chemistry instead of biology and physics and history instead of geography. (a final comma before "and history" would make the meaning clearer)

2. Use a comma before a **coordinating conjunction** (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) linking two main clauses when the subject is stated.

   I don't want to go out, yet *you* don't want to stay home.
   The *professor* moved to the front of the room, but the *students* didn't say a word.

   BUT NOT HERE:

1. The professor moved to the front of the room but didn't say a word. (becomes a compound verb for one subject)
   This comma will help to clarify whether you have two items in a series or a conjunction joining two clauses:

   NO: The first vendor was selling ice cream with chocolate chips and worms were available from the second vendor. (Without the comma, the reader's first impression is that the ice cream contains worms.)

   YES: The first vendor was selling ice cream with chocolate chips, and worms were available from the second vendor. (The comma here signals the reader that a second subject is being introduced.)

2. Use a comma to set off *introductory words, phrases and clauses* from main clauses.

   Samantha, could you please help me?
   However, he didn't believe her for one minute.
   Of all the reasons to stay home, that is the most ridiculous.
   Tired from working so hard, she decided to go home.
   Although she was tired, she decided to keep working.

3. Use a comma (or a pair of commas) to separate from the rest of the sentence any word, phrase, or clause that is not essential to the sentence's meaning or that means the same as something else in the sentence.

   The Great Dane, *a large and gentle dog*, is truly one of man's best friends.
   My uncle Fred, *who is almost seventy years old*, has been sending me presents since I was born.
   Lighting a gas barbecue is easy, *I think*.

4. Use a comma between *coordinate adjectives* (adjectives which each modify the same noun) not joined by *and*.
   Informative, imaginative writing can sell your ideas.

   (NOTE: do not use a comma between the final adjective and the noun.)
   (How do you recognize **coordinate adjectives**? Coordinate adjectives are those that still make sense when you insert the word and between the adjectives or when you scramble the order of the adjectives
   (i.e., informative and imaginative writing works; so does imaginative, informative writing.)

2. Misusing Commas

1. Do not use commas between **cumulative adjectives** (adjectives which build upon each other to modify the noun).

    NOT: The teacher worked on a complex, computer program. (*computer* modifies *program*, but *complex* modifies *computer program*, not just *program*)

    (How do you recognize **cumulative adjectives**? Cumulative adjectives are those that no longer make sense when you insert the word and between the adjectives or when you scramble the order of the adjectives (i.e., *complex* and *computer program* doesn't make sense; nor does *computer, complex program*).

2. Do not use a single comma between a **subject** and its **verb**.

    NO: The two English **courses** that I took, ***were*** so basic that I never really learned anything.
    NO: The **group** of nearly twenty members, ***provides*** opportunities often not feasible for the independent teacher.
    NO: **Finding transportation** to these programs without the benefit of public transit, ***is*** difficult for those who may not have learned to read well enough to obtain a driver's license.

    * However, you may use a **pair** of commas to enclose a non-essential expression between the subject and verb (see section A.4):

    YES: The two English courses that I took, English 101 and 102, were so basic that I never really learned anything.
    YES: The group, which consists of nearly twenty members, provides opportunities often not feasible for the independent teacher.

3. Do not use a comma between **a verb and its object** or between **a preposition and its object**.

    NO: The cast gave an even more amazing, performance.
    YES: A strong effort brings satisfactory results.

4. Do not use a single comma **after a coordinating conjunction** (compare section A.2).

    NO: I knew nothing about physics yet, I passed the test easily.
    NO: I knew nothing about physics, yet, I passed the test easily.
    YES: I knew nothing about physics, yet I passed the test easily.

    *However, you may use a **pair** of commas to enclose a non-essential expression after the conjunction (see section A.4):

    YES: I knew nothing about physics, yet, thank goodness, I passed the test easily.

5. Do not use a comma after ***such as*** or ***like***.

    NO: We grow many types of fruit trees such as, cherry, apple, orange and banana.
    YES: We grow many types of fruit trees, such as cherry, apple, orange and banana.

6. Do not use a comma before a parenthesis.

    NO: Mr. Sykes went to see her, (after school) but she was not there.
    NO: Mr. Sykes went to see her, (after school), but she was not there.
    YES: Mr. Sykes went to see her (after school), but she was not there.

3. Using Semi-colons

Use a semi-colon between independent clauses closely related in meaning and **not joined by a coordinating conjunction**.

Mary wishes to major in English literature; her identical twin wishes to major in philosophy.
Use a semi-colon to separate main clauses **joined by conjunctive adverbs** such as *however*, *therefore*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *then*, *thus*.

Ernest Hemingway was a master of style; however, opinions about his work vary widely.

(NOTE: The semi-colon remains between the two clauses even when the conjunctive adverb is moved:

Ernest Hemingway was a master of style; opinions about his work, however, vary widely.
Ernest Hemingway was a master of style; opinions about his work vary widely, however.) Use semi-colons to separate phrases or clauses in a **series** if the items are long or contain internal punctuation.

We can help clean up the environment if we *avoid* littering, polluting, and using throwaway containers; *protest* against dangers to the environment by writing to those in authority, publicizing information, joining groups, and campaigning; *plant* trees and gardens; and *protect* endangered species.
OR
Harry went on a trip with Fred, his uncle; Susan, his sister; Biff, his dog; and his mother.
(Remember to use a semi-colon before the final *and*.)

4. Using Colons
Use a colon following an independent clause to **introduce** a series, example, explanation or a quotation.

NO: The options in the course catalogue are: a major, a major-minor, and a double major.
YES: The course catalogue offers several options: a major....
YES: The options in the course catalogue are a major....

NO: Hamlet says: "To be or not to be . . ."
YES: Hamlet reveals his doubt and confusion: "To be or not to be . . ."
OR: Hamlet says, "To be or not to be . . ."
Use a colon following an independent clause to introduce a second main clause that **explains** the first.

His intention is clear: he will do the extra credit project.

5. Using Other Punctuation

Use **Dashes** to emphasize part of a sentence and indicate a break--whether it's necessary or not--in tone or thought. Type two hyphens with no space before, after, or between.
Use **Parentheses** to separate incidental information (information you do not need) from the rest of the sentence.
Use **Square brackets** to enclose your own comments to "explain, clarify, or correct his [the writer's] words" within a quotation.
Use **Quotation marks** to enclose direct words of a speaker or exact words from a book or article. Remember that end punctuation, "including commas and periods," goes "inside the quotation marks"; semi-colons and colons go outside.