Commas: Four Basic Rules

Additional information is available in *A Writer’s Reference* in the P1 and P2 sections.

**Rule #1: Commas and Conjunctions**

Use a comma before a conjunction [“fanboys”: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so] that connects 2 complete sentences; do not use a comma before a conjunction if 2 complete sentences are not being connected.

- Example A: I walked my dog, but I did not walk very far.
- Example B: I walked my dog but did not walk too far.

**Rule #2: Commas and Introductory Information**

Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause.

- Introductory Phrase: To me, reading is enjoyable. Running late, he had to hurry.
- Introductory Clause: When I am sleepy, it is hard for me to focus on what I read.

**Rule #3: Commas and Interruptions**

Use a comma before and after a word/phrase that interrupts a sentence.

- Example A: I do, honestly, love to write.
- Example B: Those toys, the ones that make loud noises, are giving me a headache.

**Rule #4: Commas and Lists**

Use a comma between items in a series (for 3 or more items in a list), including a comma before the final item (which is after a conjunction – usually “and” or “or”). You will have one less comma than items. Your list should also use parallel language.

- Example A: I like hiking, biking, and swimming
  [NOTE: This list is also parallel because all items follow an “-ing” pattern.]
- Example B: Today, I should clean my house, wash my car, plant my garden, or give my cat a flea bath.
  [NOTE: This list is parallel because all items start with a verb and then follow through with a direct object.]