Commas

Without proper comma use, a perfectly valid sentence can lose most, if not all, of its power. Though there are several rules and exceptions to comma usage, once you get a hold of the basics, your writing clarity will vastly improve.

Lists:
The commas in a list separate thoughts from each other and keep the sentence, and its intention, clear.

For example:
We went to the park with his brothers, Frank, and Jim.

With commas, it becomes clear that Frank and Jim were not the brothers being referred to, but additional information. If there are no commas at all, the number of people the author writes about becomes unclear.

It is up for debate, though, whether or not the comma before “and” in the previous example is necessary. If the last comma is removed, the sentence still makes sense, though is a bit unclear. In situations like this, it would be best to review the sentence for clarity and make a decision whether or not a comma would help. If there is still confusion, the sentence can always be rearranged for clarity.

For example:
We went to the park with his brothers, Frank and Jim. becomes We went to the park with Frank, Jim and his brothers.

Separate Clauses:
Commas can be used to separate clauses from each other in a sentence. However, only use a comma before the conjunction if there is more than one independent clause (i.e., a clause that can serve as a complete sentence on its own).

Example:
She went to the store. She bought some eggs.

When the two independent clauses are combined and separated by a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), a comma is used. If there is no conjunction, then a semicolon must be used.

Example:
She went to the store, and she bought some eggs. OR She went to the store; she bought some eggs.

When a dependent clause, a clause that has no subject and cannot stand alone, is attached to an independent clause, the comma can be omitted because the second clause borrows the subject from the independent clause. When this is applied to the previous sentence, it becomes:

Example:
She went to the store and bought some eggs.

Parenthetical Phrases:
Parenthetical phrases are those that are not crucial to the meaning of the sentence but are important to its clarity, such as:

- Once upon a time, ....
- People, due occasionally to boredom, tend to distract easily.
- Tim, ignoring the obvious stares, kept talking.
- Lisa, her eyes drooping, forced herself awake.
- Apples, Hank, cannot be blue.

Most of the time, these phrases can be taken out of the sentence, and though the sentences may lose some of their power, they do not lose their meaning.
FANBOYS:
This is an acronym for the common conjunctions that can connect two ideas. It stands for for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. There does not always need to be a comma when a FANBOYS conjunction is used, but there is a simple way to tell if a comma is needed or not.

Because the FANBOYS link two complete thoughts, a comma, coming always before the conjunction, separates the two thoughts. Look at an example of a sentence that has one complete thought and one incomplete thought separated by a FANBOYS conjunction.

Because the second thought is not complete, there is no need for a comma because the incomplete thought borrows the subject from the complete thought. A quick way to test if you have a complete or an incomplete thought is to read each thought independently as if they make sense outside of the sentence.

Examples:
✓ You wore a lovely hat.  
✗ Didn’t wear anything else.  
✓ My hamster loved to play.  
✗ Often ate marshmallows.

If there is no FANBOYS conjunction between the two complete thoughts, then a comma will not due. In that case, a semi-colon (;) would be your best bet.

Imitation FANBOYS:
There are other words out there that can help connect your thoughts, commonly however, therefore, moreover, and other words like it. These are sometimes mistakenly treated just like a FANBOYS conjunctions because they both connect two independent thoughts, but, in reality, they have their own set of rules. Unlike FANBOYS, these words can only be used if they bring together two complete, independent thoughts. From here, you have two choices. You can either put a semi-colon (;) with a comma after the imitation FANBOYS or put a period and separate the sentences with a comma occurring after the imitation FANBOYS.

Examples:
✓ Learning languages is useful. **However,** I never have anyone to speak to.  
✗ Learning languages is useful, **however** I never have anyone to speak to.  
✓ Learning languages is useful; **however,** I never have anyone to speak to.  
✗ Learning languages is useful, **however,** I never have anyone to speak to.

These commas rules are simple, general guidelines, and differing style guides require different rules. As always, check with your professor for what they prefer before turning in your paper.