

Commas and Semicolons

These are some basic rules regarding commas and semicolons. I'm providing you only with the information related to some of the most common errors I see in student writing. For additional rules, please consult your usage and grammar guidebook.

Common Error #1: No comma between two independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: I eat green eggs and ham but my favorite breakfast food is a big, sloppy pastrami on rye.

Correct: I eat green eggs and ham, but my favorite breakfast food is a big, sloppy pastrami on rye.

Coordinating Conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet

Caution: Don't overcorrect! Make sure that "and" is actually working as a coordinating conjunction between two *independent* clauses (each w/its own subject and verb). For example, you wouldn't say "I changed my air filter, and drained my oil." Here, the "and" connects the two verbs in the sentence related to the subject "I": "I changed" and "I drained." Hence, there's no comma necessary: "I changed my air filter and drained my oil." On the other hand, "I changed the air filter, and Bob drained the oil" has two independent clauses with two subjects doing two different verbs. It does require a comma.

Common Error #2: Semi-what?

A common use of the semicolon is that it takes the place of the ", + **conjunction**" between two independent clauses.

Incorrect: I like the fact that it rains so much in Washington; and I think that we wouldn't have such gorgeous scenery if it didn't.

Correct: I like the fact that it rains so much in Washington; I think that we wouldn't have such gorgeous scenery if it didn't.

Frequently, a **connecting word** also joins the two sentences (these are **not** coordinating conjunctions!) These words include the following: **however, thus, therefore, moreover, consequently, then.**

Correct: I enjoy a pastrami on rye; **however**, the best sandwich by far is Subway's roast beef sub.

Common Error #3: No comma after an introductory phrase.

Incorrect: Although I had to come to school early today I was glad of the additional time to complete my homework.

Correct: Although I had to come to school early today, I was glad of the additional time to complete my homework.

Other short introductory phrases (there are others) include *however*, *for example*, and *first*.

The following words indicate the beginning of an introductory dependent clause: When used this way, they are called "**subordinate conjunctions**." (They make the introductory clause "subordinate" or "dependent" upon the next clause.)

After . . .	In order that . . .	Unless . . .
Although . . .	Lest . . .	When . . .
As . . .	How . . .	Where . . .
Because . . .	So that . . .	Which . . .
Before . . .	Since . . .	While . . .
But that . . .	Supposing . . .	Who . . .
While . . .	Till . . .	
If . . .	Until . . .	

Frequently, I see these words above beginning sentence fragments.

Incorrect: Because I am a teacher.

You can *hear* that this is not a complete sentence—the "I" and the "am" don't qualify as the subject and verb of an independent clause because the "because" indicates that this is a *dependent clause*; it's dependent upon information that will follow to make it make sense.

Correct: Because I am a teacher, I spend much of my time devising ways to horrify my students.

Common Error #4: Confusing Items in a List.

Commas are often used to separate items in a list. Grammar books disagree on whether or not the comma is necessary after the final item in a list. For instance, older, more traditional grammar books suggest the following sentence is correct.

Correct: My girlfriend eats healthy foods such as oranges, yogurt, vegetables, and rice. (three commas separating four items)

More recent grammarbooks suggest that that the last comma is unnecessary in the list, and that it could be written as below:

Correct? My girlfriend eats healthy foods such as oranges, yogurt, vegetables and rice. (two commas separating four items)

This choice was especially popular with AP (Associated Press) editors in the 1950s, because it results in one less typesetting mark in each sentence, and helped squeeze a little bit of extra space for each newspaper article. Today, most editors treat the final

comma as optional. There are a few cases in which leaving out the comma can become confusing.

Incorrect: For helping me finish this project, I would like to thank my parents, Karl Marx and God.

Is the author thanking four people--his mother, his father, Karl Marx, and God? Or is he thanking his parents, who happen to be Karl Marx and God?

Correct: For helping me finish this project, I would like to thank my parents, Karl Marx, and God.

Leaving out the last comma can also be confusing when the reader wants to determine which items make a single category. Below it is hard to tell if the term "chocolate fudge sundaes" refers to one item or two, and it is also hard to tell if "ham and eggs" are a single dish, or if "ham" is one dish and "eggs" is another:

Incorrect: I like to eat several unhealthy dishes such as chocolate fudge sundaes, potato chips, ham and eggs.

Correct: I like to eat several unhealthy dishes such as chocolate fudge sundaes, potato chips, ham, and eggs. **OR** [if ham and eggs are two different entrées]: I like to eat several unhealthy dishes such as chocolate fudge sundaes, potato chips, and ham and eggs.

Likewise, are there four color patterns for these dresses or five?

Incorrect: The available color patterns for the dress are yellow, white and blue, red and white, blue and red.

Correct: The available color patterns for the dress are yellow, white and blue, red and white, blue, and red.

If there is any possible confusion, use the final comma! In other circumstances, the final comma is optional.

These are a (very) few of the common errors I see in student writing. A misplaced comma can change your emphasis and sometimes your meaning; thus, good grammar can be an asset to your argument. We also have a tendency to judge writing by its correctness; if someone hasn't taken the time to correct easily-identified grammar errors, an audience may assume (perhaps unjustly, but there it is) that the writer will exhibit the same inattention to detail in his or her argument.

This class as a whole does not focus on grammar. We only have a limited time to address this issues in class. However, if I can provide feedback and assistance I will do so, including catching repetitive errors in your essays and answering any questions whatsoever you may have about grammar. However, I've found that the best way to learn grammar rules is to *look them up and apply them*. I'll let you know on your essays when there are difficulties, and I'll try to let you know what they are. Your job will be to fix them, and to let me know if you're not sure how to do so.