

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 2 *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."

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 Tennessee; 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 Tennessee; 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) are: however, for example, and first.

The following words often indicate the beginning of an introductory dependent clause:

<i>After...</i>	<i>Before...</i>	<i>Whenever...</i>
<i>Although...</i>	<i>But that...</i>	<i>Where...</i>
<i>As...</i>	<i>In order that...</i>	<i>Whereas...</i>
<i>Because...</i>	<i>Lest...</i>	<i>Wherever...</i>
<i>While...</i>	<i>No matter...</i>	<i>Whether...</i>
<i>If...</i>	<i>How...</i>	<i>Which...</i>
<i>Since...</i>	<i>So that...</i>	<i>While...</i>
<i>Until...</i>	<i>Though...</i>	<i>Who...</i>
<i>When...</i>	<i>Unless...</i>	<i>Why...</i>

These words are called subordinating conjunctions. Frequently, I see these words beginning sentence fragments.

Incorrect: Because I am a graduate student.

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 graduate student, I spend much of my time devising ways to more successfully manage my time.

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.

Ideally, students master grammar in high school before they come to college. This course offers insufficient time to focus exclusively on grammar, but 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.