Some writers believe that a comma should be used whenever a pause is needed in the sentence. Unfortunately, this belief often results in overused or misused commas. Look at the examples below.

1. George’s girlfriend in *Seinfeld* says, “I, am breaking up, with you!” (INCORRECT)

Although this is how the audience hears this sentence in the episode of *Seinfeld*, it is nevertheless incorrect.

1. I am breaking up with you. (CORRECT)

When it comes to making comma errors, students generally fall into one of two categories: those who avoid commas altogether and those who sprinkle commas like salt on an order of fries. Don’t fall into either of these traps: use these six rules to help you use these important punctuation marks with confidence and competence.

**COMMA RULE 1: When you use a conjunction to join two complete sentences, use a comma before the conjunction. The conjunctions are *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so* (FANBOYS).**

1. Elaine needed someone to proofread her paper**, so** Stephanie volunteered.
2. Juan has almost finished his draft**, but** Brian is still working on his.

***NOTE: Be sure that the conjunctions do in fact connect two independent clauses (complete sentences). In the following sentence, the conjunction is not joining two whole sentences, so no comma is needed.***

1. Marty tried to leave early **but** could not get his car started. *There isn’t a subject after the coordinating conjunction “but”; therefore, a comma is not used.*

**COMMA RULE 2: Put a comma between items in a series—a list of three or more items.**

1. Dennis stopped by to turn in his **prewriting, rough draft, essay, and tape**.
2. Robert **left a note for his roommate, grabbed his backpack, and headed out the door**.

***NOTE: Some formats like those used in journalism do not require a comma before the conjunction and last item in the series; however, MLA and APA formats do indicate that there should be a comma. Check with your professor.***

1. She likes swimming, biking and sleeping. (**AP Style; Not correct in MLA or APA Styles**)

**COMMA RULE 3: Put a comma after an introductory expression that is not part of the main sentence. The introductory expression can be a word, a phrase, or a dependent clause.**

1. **Yes,** Christina will be there. (one word)
2. **In the middle of the class last Thursday,** Art fell asleep. (a phrase)
3. **When the students left,** the room was suddenly silent. (dependent clause)

***NOTE: When a dependent clause follows a complete sentence, do not use a comma to separate the clauses.***

1. Martina had fewer comma errors because she completed the comma DLA.

**COMMA RULE 4: When a sentence directly addresses someone by name, separate the name from the rest of the sentence with a comma.**

1. I heard**, Carlos,** that you passed your exams.
2. **Jerry,** have you finished reading Jennifer's essay?

***NOTE: Do not separate a name from the rest of the sentence when the person discussed is absent or is not being directly addressed.***

1. I heard that Carlos passed his exams.
2. Has Jerry finished reading Jennifer's essay?

**COMMA RULE 5: Watch for transitional expressions that interrupt the flow of a sentence. These transitions include words and phrases like *however, moreover, finally, therefore, of course,* and *on the other hand*. Transitional words and phrases can be used in different parts of a sentence, including the beginning, middle, and end of a sentence.**

1. **If the transition is at the BEGINNING of a sentence, serving as an introductory phrase, put a comma after it—see rule #3 above.**

**Of course,** Teri was not really surprised. **However,** the others had simply not expected it.

1. **If the transition is in the MIDDLE of a sentence and interrupts the sentence, put a comma before and after it.**

Sabrina and Barbie were**, of course,** happy to be in class.

David**, however,** was not so sure.

1. **If the transition comes BETWEEN two complete sentences, put a semi-colon before it and a comma after it (if you do not do this, you will have created a run-on or sentence).**

Jenn won the chemistry award**; of course,** she deserved it.  
 Kim wanted to go to the party**; however,** she knew she should study.

**COMMA RULE 6: Put commas around non-essential (also called nonrestrictive) material. Look especially for who or which clauses, appositives\*, and participial phrases\*\*.**

1. Mark McGuire**, who plays baseball for the Saint Louis Cardinals,** set a record by hitting seventy home runs in a single season.

\*2. Toni Morrison**, winner of the National Book Award,** read from *Beloved***,** her most famous novel.

\*\*3. Walter**, sighing loudly,** wished the film would end.