Q: What is a comma and why do we use it?
A: A comma is a punctuation mark that signifies a pause in a sentence. Writers use it to clarify meaning for the reader.

Q: So when do writers need to use a comma?
A: Generally, a comma should be used in these different situations:

1. **Introductory phrases or clauses**
   Introductory phrases usually appear at the beginning of a sentence and don’t have their own subject and verb. Insert a comma after the introductory phrase.

   *Intro. phrase*

   **Example:** Before class, Katie talked with her friends.

   Introductory clauses are dependent clauses (they contain their own subject and verb but do not express an independent thought) that come before the independent clause. Insert a comma after the introductory clause.

   *Intro./Dependent clause*                          *Independent clause*
   Sub. Verb                                          Sub. Verb

   **Example:** Before she went to class, Katie talked with her friends.

   Common words that often indicate a dependent clause are: after, although, as, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, while.

   Other introductory words that typically require a comma are: However, Yes, Well.

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Adapted from Purdue OWL and Duke University’s Writing Studio
2. **Compound sentences**

A compound sentence is a sentence that connects two independent clauses (each clause has its own subject and verb and is a complete thought) with a conjunction. To remember the list of conjunctions, use the acronym FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent clause</th>
<th>Independent clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub. Verb</td>
<td>Conj. Sub. Verb</td>
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</table>

**Example:** The girl wore brown socks, and the boy wore black shoes.

*Common comma mistake*: People tend to use a comma whenever they see a conjunction (FANBOYS). This is incorrect. A comma is only used with a conjunction if it connects two independent clauses. Make sure there is a subject and verb on both sides of the conjunction if you are using a comma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub. Verb</th>
<th>Verb</th>
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</table>

**Incorrect:** Bryan went to the market to buy peaches, but couldn't find them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent clause</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub. Verb</td>
<td>Sub. Verb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correct:** Bryan went to the market to buy peaches, but he couldn't find them.

3. **Non-essential clauses or phrases**

Use a comma when there is a phrase in the sentence that is not essential to the overall meaning of the sentence. Ask yourself: Could I take this phrase out of the sentence and the sentence would still make sense? This is an indicator that you should insert commas around the phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-essential phrase</th>
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**Example:** Amanda, my best friend, has to get surgery on her knee tomorrow.

**Example:** I am going to run in Forest Park, which is my favorite park in St. Louis, tomorrow afternoon.

*Common comma mistake*: When a clause begins with “that” it is always essential, so it doesn’t require commas.

**Incorrect:** Blake was nervous, that he would fail the test, because he didn’t study.

**Essential clause**

**Correct:** Blake was nervous that he would fail the test because he didn’t study.

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4. **Items in a series**
   Use a comma to separate items in a series. This helps clarify meaning for the reader.

   **Example:** The instructor asks students to arrive on time, keep a journal, and participate in class discussion.

   *Note:* The comma before the conjunction (in this case “and”) is usually required, but it can be omitted if there is no possibility of confusion.

5. **Coordinate adjectives**
   Coordinate adjectives are equal in importance to the noun they modify. Ask yourself: Can “and” be inserted between the adjectives and the sentence retain its meaning? Can the adjectives be reversed? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you probably have coordinate adjectives that should be separated by a comma.

   **Example:** The kind, caring woman helped the girl when she fell off her bike.

   **Example:** The cold winter weather makes me want to take a vacation to the beach.

   *No comma is needed between “cold” and “winter.” The sentence would not make sense if you reversed the adjectives and wrote “the winter cold weather makes me…”*

6. **Dates, addresses, and titles**
   With dates, use a comma after the day if the month, day, and year are listed. If this date is also in the middle of a sentence, insert a comma after the year.

   **Example:** Jane Doe was born on May 3, 2000, in St. Louis, Missouri, to John and Mary Doe.

   If just the month and year are mentioned, a comma is not necessary.

   **Example:** He moved to Detroit in August 2003.

   Insert commas around an individual’s title if the title follows the person’s name.

   **Example:** Anna, MBU’s Writing Lab coach, enjoys meeting with students to help them with their writing.

   Do you still have more questions about comma usage?

   Don’t worry! The following resources are available to solve all of your comma complications:

   - Purdue OWL, [http://owl.english.purdue.edu](http://owl.english.purdue.edu)
   - Duke University’s Writing Studio, [http://uwp.duke.edu/](http://uwp.duke.edu/)