Using Commas, Semicolons and Colons

This tip sheet acts as a handy reference to help you know when and how to use commas, semicolons, and colons.

What is a comma?
A comma is a punctuation mark that is used for several grammatical purposes. It can be used to separate, stress, join, and clarify different elements in a sentence.

Use a comma between independent clauses if they are connected by a coordinating conjunction
An independent clause is a group of words with at least one subject and one verb, which can stand alone as its own sentence. A coordinating conjunction is a word that joins two independent clauses. When you are joining two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, use a comma, followed by the coordinating conjunction.

   E.g. I wanted to go, but I couldn’t afford to buy a ticket.
   E.g. You should pay your bills on time, or you will have to pay interest.

Memory tip for coordinating conjunctions:
To help you remember all the coordinating conjunctions, use the mnemonic FANBOYS which stands for for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Note: You can also join two independent clauses with a semi-colon.

Do not use a comma as a period (comma splice)
When there are two sentences, a comma alone cannot be used to connect them, for this would be a comma splice. One can instead use one of the following three options: 1) a period; 2) a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction; 3) a semi-colon (if the two sentences are related in meaning).

Use commas to separate listed items
When three or more items are listed in a series, a comma is placed between the items.

   E.g. We purchased bread, rice, and broccoli at the grocery store.
   E.g. Mary wrote a letter of complaint to the clerk, to the manager, and to the CEO.
Use a comma to separate listed adjectives
When two or more adjectives are used to describe a noun, put a comma between the adjectives.

E.g. He drives an old, beat-up car.

Caution: Sometimes, using a comma to separate listed adjectives is not necessary. In order to find out if it is necessary, you should apply these two tests:

1. If you were to switch the order of the adjectives, would the sentence still be complete and clear?
   E.g. He drives a beat-up, old car.

2. If you were to add ‘and’ between the adjectives, would the sentence still be complete and clear?
   E.g. He drives an old and beat-up car.

If these two tests prove to be successful, use a comma to separate the two adjectives.

Use a comma before and after non-essential material (non-restrictive adjective clause)
Nonessential material is information that, while it may be interesting, is not absolutely essential for the main idea of the sentence. That is, any material that can be left out of the sentence without changing the main idea is nonessential. This information is known as a non-restrictive adjective clause.

When the non-restrictive clause is in the middle of a sentence, commas should be placed before and after.

E.g. Sandy Smith, who went to Seneca College, is the CEO.

If you were to remove ‘who went to Seneca College’, the sentence would still be complete and clear.

E.g. Sandy Smith is the CEO.

When the non-restrictive clause is at the end of a sentence, it should be preceded by a comma and followed by a period.

E.g. The bottle is in my coat, which you can find in the closet.

If you were to remove ‘which you can find in the closet’, the sentence would still be complete and clear.

E.g. The water bottle is in my coat.
Use a comma after transitional words or phrases
Transitions are words or phrases that connect the ideas of one sentence to another or one paragraph to another.

When a transitional word (therefore, however, thus, first, second, etc.) or phrase is used, a comma is placed after it.

E.g. First, I took out my keys, and then, I unlocked the door.

Use commas around additional information that interrupts a sentence.
You can use commas to separate a word or group of words that interrupt the flow of the sentence.

E.g. The fact is, Phil, that I feel quite unhappy about it.
E.g. Bagels, for example, are delicious with cream cheese.

Other expressions that are generally set off with commas include: however, in fact, at any rate, of course I think, therefore, by the way, finally.

Use commas for direct quotations
When a direct quotation is used, a comma is placed after the word that declares the direct quotation.

E.g. Her sister said, “I think I’m in love.”

When a direct quotation is before the declaring word, a comma is placed at the end of the quotation within the quotation marks.

E.g. “I’m playing with my Barbies,” replied Susie.

Use commas to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause
A dependent clause is a phrase that cannot stand alone- it needs an independent clause to make sense. Use a comma after a lengthy introductory clause of phrase or after a short introductory clause to avoid unclear meaning. Dependent clauses often contain words that indicate time (e.g. from, after, while, when, etc.).

E.g. Unclear: From the beginning the end of the film was obvious
E.g. Clear: From the beginning, the end of the film was obvious.
Use a comma to separate items in an address or a date.
When you write out a date, use a comma to separate the day from the month, and to separate the date from the year.

E.g. Saturday, September 12, 1959

When you write out an address, use a comma between the street address and the city, and between the city and the province or territory.

E.g. 100 Hilda Ave., Willowdale, Ontario

The semi-colon
A semi-colon links closely related ideas by emphasizing the relationship between the parts of a sentence.

Use a semi-colon to separate independent clauses that have closely related ideas.
The semi-colon marks the dividing point in a compound sentence (a sentence made up of two independent clauses that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction).

E.g. The policeman parked at the corner; he was hoping to stop speeders.
E.g. The manager had a good sense of humour; nevertheless, he was strict.

Use a semi-colon when listing items that already include a comma.
The semicolon is useful in punctuating major sentence elements which themselves contain commas.

E.g. We visited several schools, colleges, and universities; many churches, offices, and factories; and a number of public buildings.

The colon
A colon is a punctuation mark used to introduce information.

Use a colon to introduce a list.
The colon is principally used to introduce a list in conjunction with such words as following or as follows.

The colon may only be used after an independent clause.

E.g. The Canadians at the International Writers Conference included the following: Madeleine Thien, Emma Donoghue, Joseph Boyden, and Lawrence Hill.
E.g. The sports where the Ontario team seems in a good position to win are as follows: hockey, soccer, badminton, and swimming.