Commas

To use this handout, you must first understand the difference between an independent clause and a dependent clause.

• An independent clause is a phrase that contains a subject and verb and that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

• A dependent clause is a phrase that does not contain a subject and a verb, cannot stand alone as a complete sentence, and must be reworded or attached to an independent clause to form a complete sentence.

Use a comma

• To separate items in a series. The comma separates the items in a list and belongs before the "and" or the "or" at the end of the series:

  Example: The common causes of depression in college age students include sleep deprivation, inadequate diet, broken relationships, loneliness, and substance abuse.

• To separate two independent clauses joined by and, but, or, nor, for, so, or yet:

  Example: We could go white water rafting without a guide and equipment, or we could protect ourselves by hiring a guide and using the best equipment possible.

• To separate a dependent clause from an independent clause:

  Example: To succeed in using commas (dependent clause), a student must practice writing many sentences (independent clause).

• To set off a dependent clause that modifies the independent clause, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence:

  Example: Not worried about protecting her skin, Becky drove to the beach in a convertible.

  Example: Becky, not worried about protecting her skin, drove to the beach, in a convertible.

• To set off words or phrases that may be additional information but are not necessary to the meaning of the sentence (i.e. are nonrestrictive):

  Example: Billy Joel, who is talented, will be successful