1. Use a comma **to separate the elements in a series** (three or more things), including the last two. "He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base."

You may have learned that the comma before the "and" is unnecessary, which is fine if you're in control of things). This last comma—the one between the word "and" andthe preceding word—is often called the **serial comma** or the **Oxford comma**.

**2. FANBOYS: Use a comma + a little conjunction** **to connect two**[**independent clauses**](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/clauses.htm), as in "He hit the ball well, **but** he ran toward third base."

One of the most frequent errors in comma usage is the placement of a comma *after* a coordinating conjunction

1. Use a comma **to set off introductory elements**, as in "*Running toward third base*, he suddenly realized how stupid he looked."
2. Use a comma **to set off parenthetical elements (the added information)**, as in "The Founders Bridge, *which spans the Connecticut River,* is falling down." By "parenthetical element," we mean a part of a sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of that sentence. When a parenthetical element — an interjection, adverbial modifier, or even an adverbial clause — follows a coordinating conjunction used to connect two independent clauses, we do *not*put a comma in front of the parenthetical element.

When both a city's name and that city's state or country's name are mentioned together, the state or country's name is treated as a parenthetical element.

* We visited Hartford, Connecticut, last summer.
* Paris, France, is sometimes called "The City of Lights."

When the state becomes a possessive form, this rule is no longer followed:

* Hartford, Connecticut's investment in the insurance industry is well known.

Also, when the state or country's name becomes part of a compound structure, the second comma is dropped:

* Heublein, a Hartford, Connecticut-based company, is moving to another state.

1. Use a comma **to separate coordinate adjectives**. You could think of this as If you can put an *and* or a *but* between the adjectives, a comma will probably belong there. For instance, you could say, "He is a tall and distinguished fellow" or "I live in a very old and run-down house." So you would write, "He is a tall, distinguished man" and "I live in a very old, run-down house”.
2. Use a comma **to set off quoted elements**. Because we don't use quoted material all the time, even when writing, this is probably the most difficult rule to remember in comma usageGenerally, use a comma to separate quoted material from the rest of the sentence that explains or introduces the quotation:

* Summing up this argument, Peter Coveney writes, "The purpose and strength of the romantic image of the child had been above all to establish a relation between childhood and adult consciousness."

Be careful *not* to use commas to set off quoted elements introduced by the word *that* or quoted elements that are embedded in a larger structure:

* Peter Coveney writes that "[t]he purpose and strength of . . ."
* We often say "Sorry" when we don't really mean it.

And, instead of a comma, use a colon to set off explanatory or introductory language from a quoted element that is either very formal or long (especially if it's longer than one sentence):

* Peter Coveney had this to say about the nineteenth-century's use of children  
  in fiction**:** "The purpose and strength of . . . . "

1. Use commas to set off phrases that express contrast.

* Some say the world will end in ice, not fire.
* It was her money, not her charm or personality, that first attracted him.
* The puppies were cute, but very messy.

**Use Commas With Caution**

As you can see, there are many reasons for using commas, and we haven't listed them all. Yet the biggest problem that most students have with commas is their **overuse**. Some essays look as though the student loaded a shotgun with commas and blasted away. Remember, too, that a *pause* in reading is not always a reliable reason to use a comma. Try not to use a comma unless you can apply a specific rule from this page to do so.

1 .In Twain's novel racism provides unique symbolism.

2. Eventually I got around to finishing the term paper.

3. In fact the planet Mars glows red on a clear night.

4. With sweat pouring down his face the point-guard stepped up to the free-throw line.

5. Quickly I ran down the street to the corner store.

6. At the casino Mike lost his money and his pride.

7. Pausing only for a sip of water the runner continued on at an exhausting pace.

8. Although I was tired I finished the paper by the 6:00 A.M. deadline.

9. Sleepily the student designed this wonderful exercise.

10. Reluctantly the prisoner accepted his fate.