

The Writing Centre

Editing for Commas¹

Research has shown that five of the most common errors in college writing involve commas. Check your writing for these five errors.

1. Check every sentence that doesn't begin with the subject to see whether it opens with an introductory element (a word, phrase, or clause that tells when, where, how, or why the main action of the sentence occurs). An introductory element needs to be followed by a comma, separating the introduction from the main part of the sentence.
 - * To win the contest, Connor needed luck.
 - * Eventually, I wondered whether I could change careers.
2. Look at every sentence that contains one of the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*. If the group of words before and after the conjunction each functions as a complete sentence, you have a compound sentence. Make sure to use a comma before the conjunction.
 - * The climbers will reach the summit today, or they must turn back.
 - * The show started at last, and the crowd grew quiet.
3. Look at all adjective clauses beginning with *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *when*, or *where*, and at phrases and appositives (a noun that renames a nearby noun). Consider each element, and decide whether it is essential to the meaning of the sentence. If the rest of the sentence would be unclear without it, you should *not* set off the element with commas.
 - * Drivers *who have been convicted of drunken driving* should lose their licenses.
 - * The two drivers involved in the accident, *who have been convicted of drunken driving*, should lose their licenses.
4. Identify all adjective clauses beginning with *that*, and make sure they are **not** set off with commas.
 - * I don't let my children watch TV shows that are violent.
5. Check every *and* and *or* to see if it comes before the last item in a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses. Be sure that each item in a series (except the last) is followed by a comma.
 - * My local grocery store does not sell broccoli, peas, or carrots.
 - * History is preoccupied with politics, ideas, and movements.

¹ Lunsford, Andrea, Robert Connors, and Judy Segal, eds. *The Everyday Writer: A Brief Reference*. Toronto, Ontario: St. Martin's, 1997.