Common Comma Errors

Use commas to separate out items in a series of three or more.

1. I need to finish my paper, proof it, and turn it in. (Correct)
2. I need to finish the title page, introduction, and reference list for my paper. (Correct)

Use commas to separate two independent clauses (think the comma could be a period and the two clauses would be complete sentences) when there is a small conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so).

1. I need to finish my paper, and you need to leave (Correct)
   *I need to finish my paper. You need to leave. Both work as free standing sentences.*
2. I need to finish my paper, and turn it in. (Incorrect)
   *I need to finish my paper. And turn it in. And turn it in lacks a subject.*
3. I need to finish my paper and turn it in. (Correct)

To separate parenthetical elements. These are elements that can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning. They often make the sentence clearer, but the main clause works without them.

1. The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, was a wonderful book. (Correct)
   *It could also read: The Great Gatsby was a wonderful book.*
2. My goal, to become a better writer, is within reach. (Correct)
   *It could read: My goal is within reach.*

Use commas with Introductory clauses. These can be conditional: using if to begin a sentence. They can be infinitive clauses: Using a verb that is not conjugated. Or these can also be adverbial clauses. These are clauses that begin with an adverb: although, because, while, until…. It should be stressed that if the main clause comes first, there is no comma. It is no longer introductory.

1. Conditional: If I do well on my paper, I will get an A. (Correct)
2. Infinitive: To get better at writing, I must practice as much as possible. (Correct)
3. Adverbial: While writing my paper, I realized I needed help with commas. (Correct)

But remember no comma is used when the clause is no longer introductory.

1. I realized I needed help with commas, while writing my paper. (Incorrect)
2. I realized I needed help with commas while writing my paper. (Correct)
Use commas with prepositional phrases longer than 3 words, or to keep it from merging with what follows it.

1. In the late morning, I will go to the writing center. (Correct)
2. By evening I went to the writing center. (Correct) Only two words.
3. Inside the Writing Center staff was helpful. (Incorrect) Being inside the Writing Center Staff is not very helpful. It is actually kind of gross.
4. Inside, the Writing Center staff was helpful. (Correct)

When an introductory adverb modifies the whole clause.

1. Sadly, I missed my appointment at the Writing Center. (Correct) You did not do the action sadly; it was sad that the whole clause happened.