Comma Rules:

1. Use a comma to combine two complete sentences when using a coordinating conjunction - for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Comma:

I like to bake desserts, and I consider myself an expert at baking cupcakes.

A comma + the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ is placed after desserts to separate the two complete sentences.

No Comma:

I don’t know if I want to bake cupcakes or a layer cake for my mom for her birthday.

Even though the coordinating conjunction ‘or’ is used in this sentence, it is not used to separate two complete sentences; rather, the ‘or’ is used to distinguish between two possibilities.

★ Note:

- Did you know you can remember all the coordinating conjunctions by using the handy acronym FANBOYS? FANBOYS = For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.

2. Use a comma after introductory or subordinate clauses in sentences. These clauses are called dependent clauses because they are not complete sentences and generally start words such as: after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while.

Comma:

While out running errands, I stopped for lunch at Chipotle.

‘While out running errands’ is a dependent clause, meaning it is an incomplete sentence. Because this clause comes at the beginning of the sentence, use a comma to separate between the dependent clause and the independent clause.
Campus Academic Resource Program
Comma Usage

No Comma:

I stopped for lunch at Chipotle while out running errands.

When the dependent clause appears at the end of a sentence, so no comma is used.

★ Note:

- Sentences that include a dependent or introductory clause at the beginning of a sentence are called complex sentences.
- Often these sentences begin with a preposition or are transitional phrases.
- To know where to place the comma, identify the main subject of the sentence. The subject of the sentence generally comes immediately after the dependent clause.

3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

Example:

My professor, who received his PhD from Berkeley, specializes in Medieval Literature.

If the phrase between the commas can be removed and not alter or confuse the meaning of the sentence, then you know it is nonessential and can be offset by commas. In this example, ‘My professor specializes in Medieval Literature’ is a complete sentence with or without the addition of the added information about his credentials.

4. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

Example:

I bought chips, salsa, and soda for the party this weekend.
5. Use commas to separate two or more coordinating adjectives that describe the same noun. Be sure never to add an extra comma between the final adjective and the noun itself.

Example:

I strive to be a responsible, hard-working student.

6. Use commas to set off all geographical names, items in dates (except the month and day), addresses (except the street number and name), and titles in names.

Example:

San Francisco, CA
November 6, 2013
Sam Johnson, PhD

7. Use a comma to shift between the main discourse and a quotation.

Example:

During a lecture on female poets, my professor said, “Emily Dickinson only published a handful of poems during her lifetime.”