**Common Mistakes with Commas**

In a recent study on university-level composition courses, Lunsford and Lunsford1 surveyed thousands of university papers to find frequent errors. At the top of the list were the following comma errors. Review this worksheet to see if

you're making a common comma error!

**1. Missing Comma after an Introductory Element**

Introductory elements are dependent clauses (fragments of a sentence that cannot stand alone) and can usually be identified by the inclusion of prepositions (in, by, around, for, below, etc.).

**Introductory Element (Prepositional Phrase)**

a. **Example:** In the 1960s there were many protests.

b. **Correction:** In the 1960s**,** there were many protests.

**Proper Comma Placement**

Without this correction, your reader may not differentiate the context of your sentence (the 1960's) from the main point (there were many protests). Making this distinction becomes even more important for more complicated sentences.

**2. Unnecessary Comma**

Students often make the mistake of placing commas when they think the reader should "pause." Though a comma often represents a slight pause, try to ask whether you are using a comma to meet the requirements of a specific rule.

The most comma rules requiring a comma include 1) separating elements in a list, 2) connecting two independent clauses

with a "little conjunction," 3) setting off introductory elements, 4) separating coordinate adjectives, 5) separating parenthetical/non-essential elements, and 6) setting off quotations.

There are several more, but if you cannot find a rule to support your use of a comma, you probably don't need that

comma! The best way to check is to meet with your instructor or an Academic Writing Center tutor today!

**a. Example:** But**,** we have to consider the implications of such policies.

**Though the word "but" is a conjunction, it does not qualify as an introductory element. Therefore, the comma is not needed.**

b. **Example:** There were three, blind mice in the field.

**In this example, the comma after the word "three" is not needed**

**because numerical adjectives are not required to be separated from following adjectives.**

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Lunsford, Andrea, and Karen J. Lunsford. "'Mistakes are a Fact of Life': A National Comparative Study." *CCC* 59.4 (2008): 781-806.

**3. Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence**

Sometimes a comma can be used to lengthen or enhance a simple sentence so it becomes a compound or complex sentence. To do this, the use of a conjunction (and, or, but, yet) is needed.

**This part of the sentence can stand alone as its own**

**sentence because it has a subject and a verb. With no**

**comma separating it from the first part of the sentence, it is considered a run-on sentence.**

a. **Example:** We're all friends here but we just can't get along.

b. **Correction:** We're all friends here**,** but we just can't get along.

**With a comma placement after the word "here," the**

**conjunction word "but" bridges the two complete sentences together to form one compound sentence.**

**4. Comma Splice**

It is a common mistake to place a comma between two independent clauses (sentences that can stand alone), hoping to join two thoughts into one. Most of the time these two thoughts should be separated by a period to form two sentences.

a. **Example:** It is nearly half past five, we cannot reach town before dark.

**These two independent clauses form their own complete**

**sentence and require separation (a period) or bridging (with a conjunction).**

b. **Correction:** It is nearly half past five**.** We cannot reach town before dark.

**With a period here, we can separate the two**

**independent clauses to form their own complete sentences.**

**c.**

**Alternative Correction:** It is nearly half past five, so we cannot reach town before dark.

**In this version, the two independent clauses were joined with "so," which is a coordinating conjunction.**

**If you have additional questions about comma usage,**

**be sure to stop by the Academic Writing Center today to learn more!**