Commons 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 four 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.). The prepositional phrase is underlined in the example below:

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

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

# **2. Unnecessary Commas**

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
6. setting off quotations

***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.*

***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.*

# **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.

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

*The underlined 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.*

***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.

***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).*

***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.*

***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 need further assistance with this or any other writing issue, visit the Academic Writing Center!