The Comma is the most frequently used punctuation mark in English and the mark that causes writers the most difficulty. Mastering the following rules will help you gain control over comma usage and help you make stylistic decisions as a writer.

Rule numbers in parentheses refer to Rules for Writers, chapters 32 and 33.

1. Use a comma to follow introductory modifiers. (32b)
   ** adverb clauses
   After he finished the assignment, he played golf.
   ** verbal phrases
   Hiding behind the door, she watched the thief lift her jewels.
   ** long prepositional phrases
   After studying for his test on Milton, Alex took a nap.
   ** single words (including transitional words)
   However, the implications of success are not so apparent.

2. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses: and, or, nor, but, yet, for, so. (32a)

   He left F&M, and he transferred to Lehigh.

3. Do not use a comma before coordinating conjunctions joining pairs of words, phrases or dependent clauses. (33a)

   Jacob was a complex man and an unforgiving one.

4. Use commas to set off nonrestrictive sentence elements – clauses, phrases, or words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. (32e)

   Jackson, who slumped through much of August and September, has hit one homer in the last four games.

   My roommate, a varsity swimmer, had to return to campus for swim practice before winter break ended.

5. Do not use commas to set off restrictive sentence elements – clauses, phrases, or words that are essential to the meaning of the sentence. (32e, 33e)
Students who drink a lot of beer are rowdy.

I have three brothers. My brother Paul is a junior at Cornell.

6. Use commas to separate items in a series—a list of three or more items. Usually, but not always, a conjunction appears before the last item. Some publishers and writers prefer to omit the comma before the conjunction, but omitting the comma can cause confusion. You will never be wrong if you use it. (32c)

He spent his days playing tennis, studying, and working at the gym.

Seeking out America, experiencing it, dissecting it, analyzing it, each explorer was discovering himself or herself.

7. Use commas to separate coordinate adjectives, those that relate equally to the noun they modify. You can determine whether the adjectives are coordinate by inserting and between them. If the sentence makes sense with the and, the adjectives are coordinate. (32d)

The tall, handsome basketball coach was the victim.

8. Use commas to set off parenthetical and transitional expressions. (32f)

My hope, of course, is that I will pass the test essay.

Furthermore, the analysis will include a discussion of recent proposals for urban renewal.

9. Use commas to set off contrasting elements, interjections, direct address, and tag questions. (32g)

** contrasting elements
My parents gave me a Ford, not the Honda I wanted.

** interjections
Wow, he surely is tall.

** Direct address
Mr. Nachtrab, I told you why I was late.

** Tag questions
You paid the bill, did you not?

10. Use commas to separate elements of dates, addresses, titles, and numbers. (32i)

** dates and addresses
On September 3, 2009, I am moving to 430 W. James Street, Lancaster, PA.

** titles
The author is James L. Pearson, Ph.D.

** numbers of five digits or more
The city’s population is 600,000.
11. Use commas to set off a quotation from words used to introduce or identify the source of a direct quotation. A comma following a quotation goes inside the marks.

   The writing assistant said, “Punctuation is not simple.”

   “All I know about cooking,” she said, “I learned from my father.”

12. Use commas to prevent confusion and facilitate understanding. (32j)

   The graduates marched in, in marching outfits.

   To graduate is one thing; to graduate with honor, another.

13. Do not use commas between subjects and verbs, verbs and objects or complements, and prepositions and objects, even if constructions are long. The circled commas below are wrong. (33g)

   The most startling aspect of this uniform, is the pair of sneakers often permanently attached to the jock’s feet.

   Based on the evidence presented, the jury must decide, whether the accused is guilty.

14. Do not use a comma after a subordinating conjunction or a coordinating conjunction. The circled commas below are wrong. (33h)

   Although, a child may not be mature enough to decide where he can live, there are cases where grievances are such that the child should be allowed to move, even if it means leaving parents.

   Thus, fraternity parties can be a cause of drinking, but, most students here generally work this problem out as they develop their values and self-discipline.

15. Do not use a comma after such or like, before than, after although, before a parenthesis, or with a question mark or exclamation point. The circled commas below are wrong. (33h)

   Many of the campus’s eating spots, such as, Jazzman’s Café, allow students to get a quick cup of coffee between classes.

   Going to Park City Center is a far better shopping experience than, going to Wal-Mart.

   Although, the heat was on, I was still cold.

   I crammed as much as I could into my suitcase, (which was old and beat-up but, thankfully, huge), and ran out the door as fast as I could.

   “You have to try this veggie dip!,” she exclaimed. “It’s the best I’ve ever tasted.”