Grammar Workshop

Pesky Punctuation 1:  
The Comma

Signpost Punctuation

- Drivers depend on **road signs** to move them to their destination.
- Readers expect **punctuation** to guide them through a document.

Signpost Punctuation

- **Signpost punctuation** refers to the punctuation marks that:
  - readers anticipate
  - help readers understand your sentence

The Comma

- **Tip:**
  Have you been told to put a comma where you pause or breathe? **Forget it!**
  Know *why* you are inserting or deleting a comma.

The Comma

- Make sure your comma use falls into one of these four simple rules.
  **The comma separates:**
  1. Two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.
  2. A nonessential element from the main clause.
  3. An introductory element from the main clause.
  4. The items in a series.

The Comma: **No. 1**

- The comma separates **two main clauses** joined by a coordinating conjunction (**For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So**)*.
  - Observant managers notice problems, and good managers react quickly to rectify problems.

*Remember these 7 words using this tip: **FANBOYS.**
What is a main clause?

Main Clause = Sentence

A sentence has a subject and a verb and therefore can stand alone! A main clause is also called an independent clause because it is independent—it can stand alone!

What if there is no and?

- When two sentences run together with only a comma or with no punctuation, you have a run-on error.
- Run-ons make it hard for the reader to understand your sentence.

The Run-On Error

- These are run-on sentences because two sentences run together:
  - Observant managers notice problems,
  - good managers react quickly to rectify problems.
  - Observant managers notice problems,
  - good managers react quickly to rectify problems.

The Comma: No. 2

- The comma separates a nonessential element from the main clause.
- A nonessential element may have useful, important information, but the sentence can stand on its own without that element.
  - The best employees, those who demonstrate strong critical thinking skills, are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.
How do I know it’s nonessential?

- You can grab hold of the **handles** (the punctuation) around the nonessential element and pull it out of the sentence . . .
  - The best employees, those who demonstrate strong critical thinking skills, are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.

How do I know it’s nonessential?

- And the sentence can stand on its own. Then you know that the element must be set off by commas . . .
  - The best employees are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.
  - The best employees, those who demonstrate strong critical thinking skills, are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.

How do I know it’s nonessential?

- And the sentence can stand on its own. Then you know that the element must be set off by commas or by parentheses or dashes.
  - The best employees (those who demonstrate strong critical thinking skills) are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.
  - The best employees—those who demonstrate strong critical thinking skills—are sometimes hard to find even in today’s market.

The Comma: **No. 3**

- The comma separates an **introductory element** from the main clause.
  - Because my team is eager to start, let’s just grab coffee and then tackle the first item on the agenda.
  - Although I am not really hungry, we must eat lunch before the afternoon session!
  - With hindsight, experience, and maturity, we become wise (we hope).

The Comma: **No. 4**

- The comma separates the **items in a series**.
  - To be a series, there must be at least 3 items.
    - As a good manager, let the employee know that you are paying attention, that you do care about the employee’s contribution to the company, and that you value the employee.
    - With hindsight, experience and maturity, we become wise (we hope).
Decide whether you need the serial comma.

When the items are only 1-2 words long, you have a choice:
- With hindsight, experience, and maturity, we become wise (we hope).
- With hindsight, experience and maturity, we become wise (we hope).

Easy to read:
Use the comma before the *and*.
Or omit the comma before the *and*.

As a good manager, let the employee know that you are paying attention, that you do care about the employee's contribution to the company, and that you value the employee.

Regardless whether you use a serial comma, items in a series must have a parallel structure:
- Good management tells the employee that you are paying attention, that you do care about the employee's contribution to the company, and that you value the employee.
- Be sure to pick up tape, scissors, and ribbon on your way to the office!

Make sure your comma use falls into one of these four simple rules.

The comma separates:
1. Two main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.
2. A nonessential element from the main clause.
3. An introductory element from the main clause.
4. The items in a series.