And then there is that other thing: when you think you are reading proof, whereas you are merely reading your own mind; your statement of the thing is full of holes & vacancies but you don't know it, because you are filling them from your mind as you go along.

—Mark Twain
Letter to Sir Walter Bessant
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Introduction

Not sure you’re catching all the typos, grammar errors, and punctuation mistakes in your writing? Don’t have a friend or a family member you can count on?

Just because your blog or website isn’t The New York Times doesn’t mean your standards shouldn’t be high.

And if you’re a blogger or a web content writer, you know readers have a lot of choices, and they want quality. The Internet isn’t a novelty anymore, and competition is fierce.

You won’t lose a customer or a reader with error-free work, but typos could cost you.

But now you’ve got The Simple Writing Writer’s Guide, and it’s not just for bloggers. It’s for anyone who writes, even if you’re a student.

I’ve been a passionate reader all my life, so that’s one reason I have a sharp eye for the written word. I’ve also been a freelance writer, copyeditor, proofreader, college English instructor, and an avid blogger over the past fifteen years. Twenty years if you count my editing and word processing gigs in college and writing a book-length master’s thesis.

What I’ve learned, though, is that two key elements are critical to quality writing.

First, basic knowledge and skills are important.

A lot of writers do pretty well with spelling, grammar, and punctuation just because they’ve been using it all their lives. They learned in school, they picked up a few things on their own, and the rest comes in by osmosis. But that only goes so far.

You need to know what you’re looking for when you edit and proofread your own writing. If you don’t, how do you know when the job is done? How do you know it’s as good as it can be? Because it sounds right?

Second, writing is an art—it’s a creative process, for the most part—but proofreading is a science.

Writing sits at one end of the creativity-science spectrum and proofreading at the other. Editing, however, is in the middle because it overlaps art and science depending on whether we’re talking about minor grammar issues and improving punctuation or rewriting entire sections.

The science is a matter of knowing the rules. Following tried-and-true techniques and developing a system is important, and that can be learned and improved.
Knowing the difference between writing, editing, and proofreading is critical. They’re separate tasks that use different skills.

For starters, daydreaming while writing is almost mandatory. When you’re in the idea-generation and writing phase, you’re like a painter with a brush slapping down broad strokes and gobs of paint. You’re creating.

When you’re stretching a canvas or framing the painting, on the other hand, you’re not creating. You’re editing and using specific widths and lengths—science, in a sense—to accent the painting. And you have to follow some rules; you don’t want a flimsy or narrow frame on an enormous oil painting or a heavy, ornate frame on a dreamy little watercolor.

The same applies to writing, editing, and proofreading. Go crazy all you want while writing, but when it comes to editing and proofreading your work, shift focus and start thinking about some rules.

Don’t remember the rules? Do you place a comma where it “sounds right” or where you pause, but you’re not sure it works? Not sure whether to use *that* or *which*, *who* or *whom*? No problem.

*The Simple Writing Writer’s Guide* not only explains proofreading and editing techniques, it also covers some common grammar and punctuation challenges.

A list of recommended authorities is also included for extra help plus loads of editing and proofreading tips you’ll find helpful.

This little guide is short and simple. It doesn’t cover everything you need to know, of course, but if you want to polish your writing and make it the best it can be, check it out.

Wishing you success on your writing journey!

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PS Main section titles are linked; click to return to the table of contents.
Part One: The Technique

It’s easy to see errors in someone else’s writing, but it’s much more difficult to proofread your own work. Why?

When you’re reading what others have written, much of it is unexpected. You’re alert as you read and try to make sense of things.

Plus, the other writer’s “voice” may be unfamiliar, and when you hit a bump in the road—an error—you really feel it. You see it. Even if you don’t know exactly what the problem is, the writing won’t flow well if there are a lot of errors.

When you read your own writing, on the other hand, you know what to expect. You already have a picture in your mind of what it’s about, and you tend to skim over words and groups of words quickly without examining them.

On top of that, you know your own voice, and you don’t “hear” the errors or see them because you know what the article or story is about. You’re in a hurry, and your mind fills in the blanks as you skim over things. You might be daydreaming—even if you’re reading out loud.

If you don’t have a good system in place, your writing might have errors that detract from its effectiveness.

So what can you do? You can learn to edit and proofread your own writing—accurately and consistently—by learning the techniques and tips that follow. With practice over time, you’ll develop the sharp eye of a professional copyeditor and proofreader even with your own writing.

Take it in steps. It takes some time, sure, but it’s the only way to be accurate.

Step One: Sentence by sentence

While proofing a blog post I wrote a few years ago—“Have You Forgiven Anyone Lately?”—the process went something like this.

First sentence: “Just after I turned 19, I was hit by a car.”

This is a short, relatively uncomplicated sentence. At a glance, I can see it’s fine, partly because I know it so well.

But what if I didn’t? Or what if I had changed things around slightly on a previous editing pass? I’d better look closely.
I read the first sentence out loud slowly as a collection of words, not as the beginning of a story, as an event, or as anything personal. And obviously, this is personal, which makes treating the writing objectively much more challenging.

There’s no thinking about the meaning of it, no images conjured up in my mind. My eyes go back and forth examining everything. It’s different from a writing focus, and I’m on the alert for daydreaming, memories, and distracting noises or thoughts that would take my attention away from the task.

As I proofread that sentence, here’s what goes through my mind:

Just after I turned 19, I was hit by a car.


Next sentence:

It was bad, and I was in the hospital for a long time.

Capital letter, period. Good. Comma. There’s an independent clause. Good. Subject, verb—it was. Good. Another one—I was followed by two phrases in the hospital and for a long time. Fine. Coordinating conjunction—and—connects them. Good. Gets comma before and because both clauses are independent. Hmmm, that’s such a simple construction, maybe I should jazz it up a bit… Nope, that was intended. Done. Next.

Check only for grammar, spelling, and punctuation on this pass. Make notes about anything else for now.

Sure, it takes some time. Anything worth doing takes time. Is your writing worth your time? Is it worth the time it takes to improve it and make it the best it can be?
Next sentence:

It was six months before I walked again without crutches, and it took much longer than that to walk without pain or dizziness.

At this point, I make a quick note because I’m not checking for repetitive stuff (like numbers spelled out or not) that would take me away from my sentence-by-sentence focus. It’s a distraction, so I keep going.

When you’re done with the sentence-by-sentence editing or proofreading, check your notes.

In this case, I realized I had several instances of “19” whereas other numbers under 100 were spelled out. Since that’s the rule I use for my blog posts—any number under 100 is spelled out—I searched for all numbers under 100 and made corrections as needed.

Step Two: Check facts, dates, quotes, text in tables or text boxes, and anything repetitive separately.

Depending on the type of writing I’m doing, I’ll make separate passes for fact-checking, documentation, dates, and so on. I might make four or five passes on one blog post or article before I hit publish or send to a client.

Even then, in the case of my own blog posts, I’ll re-read it once again after publishing. Once in awhile I catch something very nitpicky.

Ideally, I wouldn’t even post it to the blog until it’s done. Or I’d let it sit in draft mode for another day, but I see my own writing differently—more objectively—after it’s published. There are better ways, though, to help you see with fresh eyes in the tips below.
Step Three: Check format

Even the simplest document has a format. Spacing between paragraphs, left margins, headings and sub-headings, bullet list indentation, font consistency, and many other elements are all a part of format.

Checking format should be the last step because word or punctuation changes can make spacing shift and, especially in a long document, many items must be examined. It’s best to focus on only a few things at a time.

Be sure to check spacing at the beginning of paragraphs and also around lists, list numbers, titles, subheadings, quotes, callouts, and captions. Hyperlinks, if any, need to be tested as well as text wrapping around photos, graphics, or tables.

Try turning on the Show/Hide function in MS Word or Show Invisibles in Pages (or the equivalent in your word processing application) to see dots that represent spaces between words as well as paragraph returns.

Part Two: The Rules

This is by no means a complete discussion of all the rules for punctuation or grammar. But if you know these basics like the back of your hand, you’ll be in good shape.

Step one: The basics.

To start, here’s a quick but essential review of sentence structure. This will probably look at least a little familiar.

➡ An independent clause, also known as a complete sentence or complete thought, must have a subject and a predicate (verb).

To qualify as an independent clause, a group of words must meet certain criteria. This is much more exact than complete sentences or complete thoughts.
Here are some independent clauses with subjects underlined once and verbs underlined twice. Note that the last two sentences contain two independent clauses each.

I ran. She threw the ball. He was tired.

The dog must have been really thirsty, for he drank his entire bowl of water.

We hurried home from the movie; however, we had a flat tire on the way.

**A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb, but it starts with a dependent “marker word” such as a subordinating conjunction.**

A dependent clause has at least one subject and its verb (like an independent clause), but a *subordinating conjunction* or other word makes that clause dependent or subordinate, which means it can’t stand alone.

A dependent clause cannot stand alone: *Though I went* to work early. (Contains dependent marker word: subordinating conjunction *though.*)

If we just write “I went to work early” we’d have an independent clause—a complete sentence that can stand alone. But the subordinating conjunction *though* makes it dependent because it suggests more information will be coming. We need to combine it with an independent clause.

**Correction:** Though I went to work early, I didn’t get anything done.

**Subordinating conjunctions** act as transitions between ideas and indicate time, place, and cause-effect relationships. They are *dependent marker words* that alert us to a dependent clause.

Some examples of subordinating conjunctions:

after, although, as, because, before, even if, even though, if, in case, now, now that, once, since, so that, that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, whether, while, why
A sentence fragment

A sentence fragment is missing a subject, a verb, or both. It’s neither an independent clause nor a dependent clause; it could be almost anything. It’s a mistake unless used carefully by an experienced writer.

Came home from school. (Lacks subject: who came home from school?)

Jim from the store. (Lacks verb: what does Jim do or “be”?)

Am excited about the upcoming project. (Lacks subject. We can guess I, but it’s awkward.)

They went out dancing for the last time. For fun. Just for fun. Tomorrow their divorce would be final. (In italics are two fragments used for emphasis by an experienced writer.)

Coordinating conjunctions join words, phrases, and sentences.

The seven coordinating conjunctions are and, or, nor, for, so, yet, but. Memorize them. Mnemonic devices like FANBOYS, YAFNOBS, or FONYBAS might help.

She peeled some apples and oranges.

I plan to visit South Africa or Australia.

I’m neither tired nor bored.

I took a break, for I was hungry.

They got there early, so they bought some coffee.

He’s intelligent yet silly.

She’s smart but careless.
Step two: The rules for sentence patterns and punctuation

Like any language, written English follows certain rules of sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation. Understanding these rules consciously—rather than by the hit or miss osmosis method—forms a solid foundation that will take you far.

Below are ten sentence structure patterns and important punctuation and grammar rules. The diagrams are great visual aids.

Memorize them. Save them. Print them out (last section), tape them to a wall near your computer, or tuck them in your backpack. Keep them on your desk or as an open file as you write, edit, or proofread.

Note: and represents all coordinating conjunctions and because represents all subordinating conjunctions.

1. **Two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction get a comma.**

   
   ______________________, and ____________________.
   
   independent clause                               independent clause

   Jessica liked to have a big breakfast, but she usually skipped lunch.

   You could ski with me, or you could join the others at the fireplace.

   (remember: and, or, nor, for, so, yet, but).

2. **An independent clause followed by a dependent clause does not get a comma.**

   
   ______________________________ because ____________________.
   
   independent clause                                dependent clause

   The little dog shook with excitement because he was so excited.

   I was hungry although I felt too tired to eat.

   **Note:** The second clause looks independent, but the subordinating conjunction makes it dependent. You could say it’s two independent clauses joined by a subordinating conjunction, but the subordinating conjunction not only joins, it also adds meaning and subordinates the clause that follows.
3. An independent clause followed by a sentence fragment (a phrase or other group of words) does not get a comma.

__________________ independent clause ____________________ dependenent clause or phrase.

Jorge was a wild and crazy guy on his way to becoming a rock star.

Anderson is the town featured in the movie.

That is the hospital where I was born.

Winters are very cold in the northeastern part of the country.

4. A compound predicate should not be separated by a comma (a compound predicate is two or more verbs that share a subject).

____________________ Subject/verb and ____________ related verb

She stood up and yawned.

She walked slowly toward her beloved and wrapped her arms around him.

I stepped back as my face went white and slowly counted to ten.

Note: more than two verbs as below require commas.

She stood up, stretched, and yawned.

5. An introductory dependent clause, phrase, or word gets a comma unless it’s one word or very short.

_____________________ introductory clause/phrase , __________________ independent clause

According to meteorologists, this summer is one of the hottest on record.

Even though it was cloudy, today’s temperature broke all the records.

Later today, we will have a storm. Tomorrow the temperature will be cooler.
6. Two independent clauses closely related in meaning can be joined with a semi-colon.

____________________ ; ____________________ .
  independent clause                      independent clause

Our neighbors visit us all the time; their kids are the same age as we are.

Blogging is a lot of fun; I wouldn’t want to do anything else.

7. Colons introduce a list, a specification, an illustration, or a quotation.

____________________ : _____ , _____ , _____ .
  independent clause                        item        item        item

Here is everything you need: pencils, paper, and a stapler.

Remember what Ben Franklin said: “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

8. Use a comma to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses including the last item before a coordinating conjunction (and, or, etc.).

____________________  _____ , _____ , and _____ .
  independent clause                 item       item                item

She loves watermelon, peaches, and pears.

I went out with my friends Nicole, Trevor, and Ezra.

Tip: In newspapers and other publications that follow the Associated Press’s AP Stylebook, a comma is not used after the last item in a series (before the coordinating conjunction). However, other publications prefer the “Oxford” or serial comma (as shown above) for clarity. Style authorities such as The Chicago Manual of Style and the New Oxford Style Manual provide information on why the Oxford comma is preferred.
9. Parallelism: Make sure all items in a series are the same: all nouns, all verbs, all infinitives, all adjectives, and so on.

noun   noun   noun   /   verb   verb   verb   /   infinitive  infinitive  infinitive

Don’t forget the onions, garlic, and peppers. (nouns)

Rebecca just loves to ski, to skate, and to swim. (infinitives)

I didn’t like her, I didn’t love her, and I didn’t hate her; I didn’t even know her. (verbs)

Note: Parallelism also applies to numbered and bullet lists.

10. Subject-verb agreement: Verbs must agree with subjects in number and person. Be careful when the subject and verb are separated by many other words.

subject   ,   _________________________   ,   verb

Robert, the tall guy who always sits next to me and my friends, taps the table constantly.

Students who are enthusiastic and ask questions help set the mood for learning.

11. Restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers: Restrictive modifiers are groups of words that restrict (define) the subject that is modified (described). They do not get a comma because they define the subject and are too important to the meaning.

The man who wore a dark jacket was the one who helped Susan.

The castle with the missing wall is very interesting.

Non-restrictive modifiers simply add additional information to a subject that’s already well-defined and clear. Set it off with commas.

The elderly man, who wore a dark jacket, helped Susan.

The ancient castle, which has a wall missing, is very interesting.
Part Three: The Tips

Tip #1: Don’t proofread until you’re completely done with writing and editing.

Make sure you’re satisfied with the message, the length, the organization, the flow, the rhythm, the slant, the attitude, the sentence structure, and the word choices. Then—and only then—begin your final close editing and proofreading.

This helps to avoid reading for story, content, or how it “sounds” so you can spot spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other problems quickly.

Tip #2: Don’t read in the usual way. Forget the content or the story.

This is harder than it sounds. When we read, we get pictures in our heads, make judgments, or wander off on whatever thoughts or feelings are triggered. Worse, we’re not even aware of it sometimes. Take special care with personal experience writing because you can easily skip over words and phrases without missing a beat—and overlook something.

Tip #3: Check the entire sentence or paragraph if you make a last-minute change to a few words.

Many errors in blog posts or on websites are words left behind (that don’t make sense) or an extra space or two after a change was made.

Tip #4: Make sure you have no distractions or potential interruptions.

That means no music, no cell phone, no Internet, no email, no kids—nothing but your writing. You have to be able to hear what’s going on in your head and monitor yourself. If you believe you work better with music, try proofreading without it for awhile and compare. If you can keep your focus better with music, that’s great. Experiment.

Tip #5: Read out loud.

You’re less likely to skip over words or start daydreaming if you read out loud. But be careful—even while reading aloud your thoughts can drift, especially if you’re tired. Sometimes I tap or slap a beat with my hand—one beat per word or syllable—to help me stay focused.
**Tip #6: Print the document and use a pencil or pen to mark errors.**

Then go back to your computer to fix them. Check them off as you make changes. If you don’t like to waste paper, use the back of junk mail or anything destined for recycling.

**Tip #7: Proofread for only one type of error at a time.**

While going over sentences, leave end punctuation or contractions and anything else for a separate step. Divvy things up according to what works for you. *Your brain can only hold a certain amount of information at one time.* Don’t overload it.

**Tip #8: Check blog post title tags and meta descriptions; typos and errors will show up in search results and on Facebook.**

When you post a blog article and search engines grab it, it’s all over. Title and meta description errors show up on Facebook, too, and they don’t go away, last I heard, even if you delete the post, fix the error, and try again. And once you tweet, forget it.

**Tip #9: Allow plenty of time for proofreading an ebook or a lengthy newsletter since they’re more complex than the average blog post.**

Font sizes and colors in titles, subheadings, tips, text boxes, and anything bolded as well as links all have to be scrutinized. Leave format for the very end and, if it’s complex, separate that into steps as well.

**Tip #10: Break the rules but only when you know what they are.**

Pay attention to what others have written—beyond the ideas and content—to see how they do things. Get creative! If you’re not sure it works, scrap it. Stick. With. The. Rules.

**Tip #11: If in doubt, throw it out!**

If you’re not sure of grammar, word choice, or punctuation in a particular sentence and don’t have time to look it up, just let it go. Change it to something simple that you know is correct. Simple is often better, anyway.

**Tip #12: Take a break, if possible, between writing, editing, and proofreading, even if it’s only for a few hours.**

A few days is even better. When you come back to your writing, you’ll look at it fresh.
Tip# 13: Pay close attention to yourself.

Learn to monitor your thoughts so you can tell when your attention is drifting. If you drift, go back over that sentence or section. Take a stretch break if you’re tired.

Tip# 14: Donut truss spiel chick (don’t trust spell check).

The spell check feature in your word processing application only tells you whether a word is in that particular dictionary, not if it’s the correct word. Their form he Untied stats, for example, doesn’t give spell check any problem, but it doesn’t look good to me. If you’re puzzled, it should be They’re from the United States. Spell check gives you a head start if you make a lot of typos from fast or careless typing, but that’s about it.

Tip# 15: Don’t rely on grammar check either.

Grammar check can give you some tips, but it’s better to just learn the rules.

Tip# 16: Pay special attention to words you’ve misused before.

Sometimes when I’m writing fast, I mix up its and it’s; too, to, and two; their, there, and they’re; and a few others. When we “hear” a word in our mind, we don’t always think which one we want when they all sound the same. So I pay close attention to my “bugger” words. I consciously think: Do I mean ‘its’ possessive or ‘it is’? Do I mean ‘they are’ or do I mean ‘their’ possessive?

Tip# 17: Try reading your writing backwards, sentence by sentence or section by section.

It might help your concentration and to see things fresh.

Tip# 18: Take the time to look up potential problems and things you aren’t sure of.

I check technology terms all the time because they change or new ones are created. Titles of books and other publications are also important: does the AP Stylebook include the in its name? Hyphenated words should also be checked to see if hyphens are no longer used. For example, email used to be e-mail or E-mail and cooperative used to be co-operative or coöperate.
Tip# 19: Be aware that an emotionally loaded topic may be difficult to write about, edit, and proofread—and remain objective throughout the project.

Avoid topics that push your buttons, if you can. If you can’t or don’t want to, just be aware that emotions can cloud judgment. Ask a qualified friend to look it over.

Tip# 20: Use a hyphen, in general, with compound adjectives that precede the noun to avoid ambiguity.

If the words are well known without the hyphen (high school student) or the same two words occur after a noun, they usually don’t get a hyphen. Compare that well-known writer and that writer is well known. A one-year-old child vs. he is one year old. If an adverb (-ly word) is involved, there’s no hyphen because the adverb is describing the adjective: a generally sunny disposition. Use a dictionary if unsure.

Tip# 21: British and American English spellings are equally correct.

Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand English writers generally follow British rules just as writers in other English-speaking countries such as India do. Language evolves, and what works for one group of people doesn’t work for another. See The Resources for a list of common Canadian, British, and American spellings.

Tip# 22: Who is a subject but whom is an object.

Who is a subject pronoun like I, you, he, she, it, we, you, and they. Whom is an object pronoun like me, her, him, us, and them.

A subject is one who performs an action or is in a state of being; an object receives action. Try replacing whom with him. If it works, then use whom. To whom/who should I send this? Should I send it to him? Whom is correct.

Tip #23: That is restrictive but which is non-restrictive

That and which are much like Rule #11 in The Rules above. That introduces a restrictive (essential or defining) clause. Which introduces a non-restrictive (non-essential or non-defining) clause. Context usually tells us whether to use that or which.

He kicked the can that was covered with mud into the street. (This is a certain can among others that had fallen out of his grocery bag.)

He kicked the can, which was covered with mud, into the street. (This is one can that had fallen out of his grocery bag)
Part Four: The Resources

APA Style (American Psychological Association) (US English)

Associated Press Stylebook (US English)

The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation (US English)

Cambridge Dictionaries Online (US, BR, various tools)

Chicago Manual of Style Online (US English)

Dictionary.com (US, BR)

Differences between British, Canadian, and American spellings

Macquarie Dictionary: Australia's National Dictionary Online (Australian English)

Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus (US and BR plus Spanish-English Translation)

Modern Language Association (US English)

Oxford Dictionaries Online (US or British English)

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) (US English)

Thesaurus.com (US English)
Part Five: A Few More Words

I hope you’ve found *The Simple Writing Writer’s Guide* helpful. And I hope you’ll refer to it as often as needed.

If there were just one key fact I’d like you to remember, it’s this: there are as many different ways to edit and proofread as there are writers, but all *good* editors and proofreaders have one thing in common: an ability to focus. And that can be developed.

Good editors and proofreaders also know their work is *not* the same as regular reading. It’s a different kind of focus, and it requires a different kind of concentration.

Have you ever tried to relax, fall asleep, or meditate and notice unwelcome thoughts that suddenly pop in out of nowhere? They’re like pesky flies or mosquitoes even if they’re fun or interesting thoughts.

Then your mind gets quiet again or you’re almost asleep, and another thought jumps in just like the other one did.

That happens while proofreading, too (or any time when we’re trying to mentally focus on something), but you can’t entertain the thought. Instead, you’ve got to shake it out of your head and go back over the sentence or paragraph you were working on to make sure you gave each word and line your full attention.

If you’re not used to focusing on the written word like this, never fear. Practice makes perfect. It also helps if you’re well rested and have a good chunk of time to work with.

If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to get in touch! And if this little guide has helped you or if you have suggestions, I’d love to know that, too. You can email me at leah@simplewriting.org

Oh, and one last tip. *Have fun!*

If you have questions or don’t understand something, email me any time: leah@simplewriting.org Or just hit “reply” to a blog post update, and I’ll be happy to help.
The Rules for Printing

1. Two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction get a comma.

____________________, and ____________________.

independent clause                               independent clause

Jessica liked to have a big breakfast, but she usually skipped lunch.

(remember: and, or, nor, for, so, yet, but).

2. An independent clause followed by a dependent clause does not get a comma.

____________________ because ____________________.

independent clause                                   dependent clause

The little dog shook with excitement because he was so excited.

3. An independent clause followed by a sentence fragment (a phrase or other group of words) does not get a comma.

____________________                            ____________________.

independent clause                   dependent clause or phrase

Jorge was a wild and crazy guy on his way to becoming a rock star.

4. A compound predicate should not be separated by a comma (a compound predicate is two or more verbs that share a subject).

____________________ and ____________.

Subject/verb                        related verb

She stood up and yawned.
5. An introductory dependent clause, phrase, or word gets a comma unless it’s one word or very short.

introductory clause/phrase , independent clause

According to meteorologists, this summer is one of the hottest on record.

6. Two independent clauses closely related in meaning can be joined with a semi-colon.

independent clause ; independent clause

Our neighbors visit us all the time; their kids are the same age as we are.

7. Colons introduce a list, a specification, an illustration, or a quotation.

independent clause : item , item , item

Here is everything you need: pencils, paper, and a stapler.

8. Use a comma to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses including the last item before a coordinating conjunction (and, or, etc.).

independent clause item , item , and item

She loves watermelon, peaches, and pears.

9. Parallelism: Make sure all items in a series are the same: all nouns, all verbs, all infinitives, all adjectives, and so on.

noun , noun, noun / verb, verb, verb / infinitive, infinitive, infinitive

Don’t forget the onions, garlic, and peppers. (nouns)
10. **Subject-verb agreement:** Verbs must agree with subjects in number and person. Be careful when the subject and verb are separated by many other words.

```
    subject , ____________________________ , _____

Robert, the tall guy who always sits next to me and my friends, taps the table constantly.
```

11. **Restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers:** Restrictive modifiers are groups of words that restrict (define) the subject that is modified (described). They do not get a comma because they define the subject and are too important to the meaning.

```
    __________ __________ ________________ .

The man who wore a dark jacket was the one who helped Susan.
```

**Non-restrictive modifiers** simply add additional information to a subject that’s already well-defined and clear. Set it off with commas.

```
    __________ , __________ , ________________ .

The elderly man, who wore a dark jacket, helped Susan.
```