Commas, Semi-Colons, and Colons

Commas
There are five main uses of commas:

1. Set off a phrase or clause before the subject.
   Ex: While she was cooking, her friends arrived.
2. Separate items in a list when no other internal commas are used.
   Ex: They bought lamps, chairs, and wastebaskets.
   *Note the comma before “and” in the list of items.
3. Indicate appositive (inserted) material.
   Ex: Harold, my boss, gave me a raise.
4. Introduce or end a quotation.
   Ex: He said, “You’ve deserved it.” or “You’ve deserved it,” he said.
5. Separate independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.
   Ex: I was grateful, so I sent him a birthday gift.
   *Coordinators include: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so
   *Note that a comma is NOT used before a clause introduced by “that.”
   Ex: He said that she should not worry.

Comma Splices and Run-On Sentences

- A comma splice occurs when main clauses are joined by a comma alone.
  Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, others write and rewrite slowly.
- A run-on occurs when main clauses are joined without a coordinating conjunction or punctuation mark.
  Ex: In earlier centuries most composers were employed by churches or noblemen now they are usually employed by universities.

Ways to Correct Comma Splices and Run-ons

1. Use a period to make separate sentences.
   Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper. Others write and rewrite slowly.
2. Use a semicolon to show a close relation between the two clauses.
   Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper; others write and rewrite slowly.
3. Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction to show the relation between the main clauses.
   Ex: Some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, and others write and rewrite slowly.
4. Use a subordinating conjunction to introduce the less important clause of the two. (Subordination is used to distinguish the main clause in a sentence from less important clauses: after, although, as, as

September 2010, Wartburg Writing, Reading, and Speaking Lab
if, because, in order that, since, so that, than, that, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, whether, while, etc.)

Ex: Although some composers put notes down as rapidly as their hands can move across the paper, others write and rewrite slowly.

**Unnecessary Comma Usage**

1. Do not use a comma between a subject and a verb.
   Ex: (Incorrect) First contact between human kind and celestial aliens, is the subject of many science-fiction works.
   Ex: (Correct) First contact between human kind and celestial aliens is the subject of many science-fiction works.

2. Do not use a comma between a preposition and its object.
   Ex: (Incorrect) Comets were once thought to be fiery messages from, angry gods.
   Ex: (Correct) Comets were once thought to be fiery messages from angry gods.

3. Do not use commas to separate restrictive elements from the rest of the sentence.
   Ex: (Incorrect) The belief, that comets are the fiery messages of the gods, is an ancient one.
   Ex: (Correct) The belief that comets are the fiery messages of the gods is an ancient one.

4. Do not use a comma after such as and like.
   Ex: (Incorrect) Some writers, such as, Hemingway and Faulkner, influenced contemporary American writers.
   Ex. (Correct) Some writers such as Hemingway and Faulkner, influenced contemporary American writers.

5. Do not use a comma before the first or after the last item in a series unless a rule requires it.
   Ex: (Incorrect) Reading, writing, and arithmetic, should be the spine of education.
   Ex: (Correct) Reading, writing, and arithmetic should be the spine of education.

6. Do not use a comma before the word than in a comparison.
   Ex: (Incorrect) Hang gliding is more exciting, than skydiving.
   Ex: (Correct) Hang gliding is more exciting than skydiving.

**Semi Colons**

Semi colons separate two main clauses that are closely related but could stand on their own.

They can add variety to paragraphs with many short sentences.

Ex: He decided that his calling in life would be to write for ESPN Magazine; he changed his major from dance performance that afternoon.

Semi colons can also be used in lists where a comma will not sufficiently separate the items.

Ex: Students came from Rochester, Minnesota; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Aurora, Illinois; and Mason City, Iowa.

*Because the items in the list already have commas, semi colons are necessary.


September 2010, Wartburg Writing, Reading, and Speaking Lab
**Colons**

Semi colons can be used to add and/or separate information to a complete sentence.

Ex: She knew exactly what she wanted: banana cream pie.

*If the sentence is not complete, this can frequently be fixed by adding “the following” before the colon.

Ex: His grocery list included: rice, beans, and cookies. (INCORRECT)

His grocery list included the following: rice, beans, and cookies. (CORRECT)

*If you aren’t sure if a colon is appropriate, see if you could replace it with “namely.” If the sentence would be correct with “namely,” it’s probably correct with a colon.

Ex: She knew exactly what she wanted, namely, banana cream pie. (CORRECT)

She knew exactly what she wanted: banana cream pie. (ALSO CORRECT)