Commas, Semicolons, and Colons

When and how to use commas:

- Commas indicate **direct quoted speech**:
  He said, “Let’s go,” and we did.
  He said we should go, and we did.
- Commas go inside **quotation marks**:
  He had heard about “oleo,” but he didn’t know what it was.
- Commas set off **transitional phrases**:
  On the other hand, many diets decrease stamina and strength.
  As a matter of fact, American football was derived from rugby.
  Many people, however, are allergic to cats.
- Use commas for **direct address**, **tag questions**, **mild interjections**, and **yes/no**:
  I hate to say this, John, but this relationship just isn’t working out.
  You like chocolate, don’t you?
  Well, I might have time for lunch with you next week.
  Yes, you must do the homework.
- Commas come before **coordinating conjunctions** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when they link two independent clauses:
  It was raining, and I was hurrying to get home.
  She felt terrible, but she went to class anyway.
- Commas follow **introductory adverb clauses** and **introductory phrases**:
  On the way home, I stopped to buy groceries.
  Because it was raining, I took a taxi home.
  To our surprise, they were brothers.
- Commas separate **items in a series**, including **coordinate adjectives**:
  He bought bananas, apples, oranges, and cheese.
  She had long, dark, straight, thick hair.
- Commas set off **nonrestrictive adjective clauses** and **other parenthetical elements**:
  My parents, who met each other in 1932, have been married for 50 years.
  Hikers need sturdy shoes, which may be expensive.

When not to use commas:

- Do not separate **dependent clauses** (incomplete sentences):
  Incorrect: Joe and Jill, went to the store.
  Correct: Joe and Jill went to the store.
- Do not separate **two elements**:
  Incorrect: I went home, and went to bed.
  Correct: I went home and went to bed.
- Do not separate **cumulative adjectives** (Try inserting the word “and” or reversing the positions of the adjectives. If the sentence is confusing, do not use a comma):
  Incorrect: I bought two, more apples.
  Correct: I bought two more apples.

When and how to use semicolons:
Semicolons connect **two independent clauses** (complete sentences) that are closely related:

*The book is informative; it has helpful charts and graphs.*
*My brother is going to Spain for the summer; he will be studying Spanish.*

Semicolons separate three or more **items in a series** that already have commas in them:

*I like big, purple shirts; red, high-heeled shoes; and fluffy, yellow pillows.*
*I live with Larry, a student; Moe, an executive; a*