

1. INTRODUCTORY BITS (SMALL-MEDIUM-LARGE)

Setting off introductory words, phrases, or clauses with a comma lets the reader know that the main subject and main verb of the sentence come later. There are basically three kinds of introductory bits: small, medium, and large ones. No matter what size they are, *an introductory bit cannot stand alone as a complete thought. It simply introduces the main subject and verb.*

There are **small (just one word) introductory bits**:

*Generally, extraterrestrials are friendly and helpful.
Moreover, some will knit booties for you if you ask nicely.*

There are **medium introductory bits**. Often these are two- to four-word prepositional phrases or brief *-ing* and *-ed* phrases:

*In fact, Godzilla is just a misunderstood teen lizard of giant proportions.
Throughout his early life, he felt a strong affinity with a playful dolphin named Flipper.
Frankly speaking, Godzilla wanted to play the same kinds of roles that Flipper was given.
Dissatisfied with destruction, he was hoping to frolick in the waves with his Hollywood friends.*

There are **large introductory bits** (more than 4 words). You can often spot these by looking for key words/groups such as *although, if, as, in order to, and when*:

*If you discover that you feel nauseated, then you know you've tried my Clam Surprise.
As far as I am concerned, it is the best dish for dispatching unwanted guests.*

2. FANBOYS

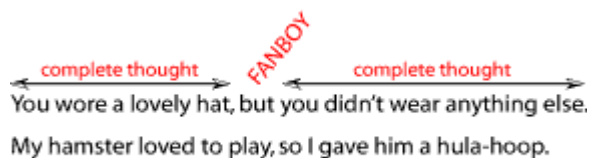
FANBOYS is a handy mnemonic device for remembering the coordinating conjunctions: **For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So**. These words function as connectors. They can connect words, phrases, and clauses, like this:

Words: I am almost *dressed and ready*.

Phrases: My socks are *in the living room or under my bed*.

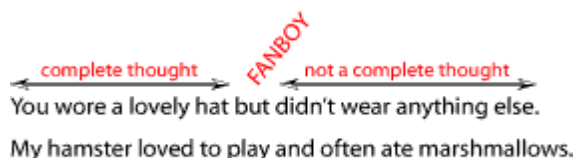
Clauses: *They smell really bad, so they will be easy to find.*

Notice the comma in the final example. You should always have a comma before **FANBOYS** that join two independent clauses (two subjects and two verbs that make up two complete thoughts). Look carefully at the next two sentences to see two independent clauses separated by **comma + FANBOYS**.

A diagram illustrating the use of a comma and a FANBOY to connect two independent clauses. Two double-headed arrows labeled "complete thought" point to the left and right of the text. The text is "You wore a lovely hat, but you didn't wear anything else." The word "FANBOY" is written in red, slanted text above the comma. Below the text is another example: "My hamster loved to play, so I gave him a hula-hoop."

complete thought ← → complete thought
You wore a lovely hat, but you didn't wear anything else.
FANBOY
My hamster loved to play, so I gave him a hula-hoop.

If you do not have two subjects and two verbs separated by the **FANBOYS**, you do not need to insert the comma before the **FANBOYS**. In other words, if the second grouping of words isn't a complete thought, don't use a comma. Try reading the words after **FANBOYS** all by themselves. Do they make a complete thought?

A diagram illustrating the use of a FANBOY to connect a complete thought with a phrase that is not a complete thought. A double-headed arrow labeled "complete thought" points to the left of the text. The text is "You wore a lovely hat but didn't wear anything else." The word "FANBOY" is written in red, slanted text above the word "but". Below the text is another example: "My hamster loved to play and often ate marshmallows."

complete thought ← → not a complete thought
You wore a lovely hat but didn't wear anything else.
FANBOY
My hamster loved to play and often ate marshmallows.

You can read your own writing in the same way. Read what comes after **FANBOYS** all by itself. If it's a complete thought, you need a comma. If not, you don't.

3. THE DREADED COMMA SPLICE

If you don't have **FANBOYS** between the two complete and separate thoughts, using a comma alone causes a "comma splice" or "fused sentence" (some instructors may call it a run-on). Some readers (especially professors) will think of this as a serious error.

BAD: *My hamster loved to play, I gave him a hula-hoop.*

ALSO BAD: *You wore a lovely hat, it was your only defense.*

To fix these comma splices, you can do one of four simple things: just add **FANBOYS**, change the comma to a semicolon, make each clause a separate sentence, or add a subordinator (a word like *because, while, although, if, when, since*, etc.)

GOOD: *You wore a lovely hat, for it was your only defense.*

ALSO GOOD: *You wore a lovely hat; it was your only defense.*

STILL GOOD: *You wore a lovely hat. It was your only defense.*

TOTALLY GOOD: *You wore a lovely hat because it was your only defense.*

4. FANBOYS FAKERS

However, therefore, moreover, and other words like them are *not* **FANBOYS** (they are called conjunctive adverbs). They go between two complete thoughts, just like **FANBOYS**, but they take different punctuation. Why? Who cares? You just need to recognize that they are **not** **FANBOYS** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so—remember?), and you'll make the right choice.

When you want to use one of these words, you have two good choices. Check to see if you have a complete thought on both sides of the "conjunctive adverb." If you do, then you can use a period to make two sentences, or you can use a semicolon after the first complete thought. Either way, you'll use a comma after the faker in the second complete thought. Notice the subtle differences in punctuation here:

GOOD: Basketball is my favorite sport. *However*, table tennis is where I excel.

ALSO GOOD: Basketball is my favorite sport; *however*, table tennis is where I excel.

BAD: Basketball is my favorite sport, *however* table tennis is where I excel.

ALSO BAD: Basketball is my favorite sport, *however*, table tennis is where I excel.

5. DESCRIBERS

If you have two or more adjectives (words that describe) that are *not* joined by a conjunction (usually *and*) and both/all adjectives modify the same word, put a comma between them.

He was a bashful, dopey, sleepy dwarf.

The frothy, radiant princess kissed the putrid, vile frog.

6. INTERRUPTERS

Two commas can be used to set off additional information that appears within the sentence but is separate from the primary subject and verb of the sentence. These commas help your reader figure out your main point by telling him or her that the words within the commas are not necessary to understand the rest of the sentence. In other words, you should be able to take out the section framed by commas and still have a complete and clear sentence.

Bob Mills, a sophomore from Raleigh, was the only North Carolina native at the Japanese food festival in Cary.

Aaron thought he could see the future, not the past, in the wrinkles on his skin.

My chemistry book, which weighs about 100 pounds, has some really great examples.

To see if you need commas around an interrupter, try taking the interrupter out of the sentence completely. If the sentence is still clear without the interrupter, then you probably need the commas.