Grammar & ESL: Refining Your Comma Usage

Commas are used:

✔ To separate three or more items in a series;
  o “She found a key, a stamp, coins, and a photograph.”
  o “The fans applauded, cheered, and whistled.”

✔ To separate adjectives that modify the same noun (coordinate adjectives);
  o “The pumpkin was round, orange, and smooth.”
  o “The cat was black, white, and brown.”

✔ To set off extra information included in sentence;
  o “Her father, a computer programmer, works late at night.”
  o “His dog, a big Labrador retriever, is afraid of mice.”
  o Note that if the information inside the commas is removed, the sentence is still grammatically correct!

✔ After most introductory phrases;
  o “After the noisy party, the neighbors complained.”
  o “Every day, Anthony jogs three miles.”

✔ To separate a verb from a quoted statement;
  o “She said, ‘I want to be a chef.’”
  o “‘I want to be a chef,’ she announced confidently.”

✔ To separate two independent clauses;
  o “Slow, children crossing.”
  o “Eat here, and get gas.”

✔ To address someone;
  o “I’ve decided to cheer up, everybody!”
  o “Honey, what’s this thing called?”

✔ Before coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, so, for, yet) that connect independent clauses.
  o “The managers are efficient, but personnel turnover is high.”
  o “The juggler juggled seven plates, and we all cheered.”
    ▪ Exception: When clauses are very short, you may omit the comma.
    • “He offered to help and he meant it.”
    • Also correct: “He offered to help, and he meant it.”
Commas are NOT used:

× NOT between a subject and a verb
  o “The gifts she received from her colleagues made her realize her value.”
  o “The actor in Get Shorty plays Tony in The Sopranos.”

× NOT between a verb and its object or complement
  o “The best gifts are food and clothes.”

× NOT before part of a compound structure that is not an independent clause
  o “She won the trophy and accepted it gracefully.”
  o “The author wrote about her mother and the rest of her family.”

× NOT before a clause beginning with “that”
  o “They warned us that the meeting would be difficult.”

× NOT with a subordinating conjunction (after, before, because, if, since, unless, until, when)
  o “She will continue working for the city until she has saved enough for graduate school.”
  o “The test results were good because all the students had studied in groups.”

× NOT after “such as”
  o “They bought kitchen supplies such as detergent, paper towels, and garbage bags.”