Commas and Coordinating Conjunctions

# **The Rule**

Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses.

# **Definitions**

**Coordinating Conjunction**: A coordinating conjunction is simply a word that joins similar grammatical units of equal rank (such as two nouns or three phrases). There are seven coordinating conjunctions in English: and, but, or, nor, yet, so, and for. Commonly, you will use "and"; "but"; "or"; and "so" in technical writing.

**Independent Clause**: A clause is a grammatical unit that contains a subject and a verb. Clauses, depending on their function in a sentence, can be dependent or independent. An independent clause is a clause that can stand all on its own. In essence, it is a complete sentence—or it could be, if it were removed from a larger sentence. When searching for independent clauses, simply ask: "Is this clause a complete sentence?" If so, the clause is independent.

# **Examples**

**Example 1:** “Your listeners have not seen the graphics and will not be able to linger over it” (Markel and Selber 588).

*Explanation***:**

Notice that this example does not have a comma before the coordinating conjunction “and.” This is because the second clause “will not be able to linger over it” is not an independent clause. Its subject (Your listeners) is stated in the first clause.

**Example 2:** “If [readers] can’t complete [a task]—or they do complete it, but they don’t achieve the expected outcome—they’ll be unhappy” (Markel and Selber 568).

*Explanation***:**

This example is two independent clauses parenthetically embedded within another sentence using long dashes (or em dashes).Notice that the rule still applies with “they do complete it” and “they don’t achieve the expected outcome” being the two independent clauses combined with “but.”

**Example 3**: “Thank the interviewer for taking the time to see you, and emphasize your particular qualifications” (Markel and Selber 417).

*Explanation***:**

This example is deceptive! In the above sample sentence, the independent clauses are written in the imperative mood, meaning that they are commands. In English, when a command is directly given, the subject (you) is understood and not stated.

# **Works Cited**

Markel, Mike, and Stuart Selber. *Technical Communication.* 12th ed, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017.