Compound Sentences

Comma Usage: Whenever you have two independent clauses separated by a coordinating conjunction, you must use a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Definition of terms:

- Coordinating Conjunctions are words that connect either two independent clauses or an independent clause and a dependent clause. The coordinating conjunctions are for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so.
- Independent clauses are those clauses that make meaning and can stand alone. They make sense. They will contain a subject and a verb or they will have an understood subject and a verb.
  1. John ran to the store. Note that in this sentence, John is the subject of the sentence and ran is the verb.
  2. Close the window! In this sentence, the subject, you, is understood, and the verb is close.
- Dependent clauses are those clauses that cannot stand alone. Even if they have a subject and verb, their meaning is incomplete.
  1. While John ran to the store Note that John is the subject and ran is the verb, so the sentence contains both a subject and a verb; however, it is incomplete and cannot stand alone. It needs more information.

Two independent clauses—two sentences—separated by a coordinating conjunction—for, an, nor, but, or, yet, so—must also be marked by a comma before the coordinating conjunction.

Sentence A: Correct comma usage: John ran to the store, but he walked home. Notice that both clauses on either side of the comma can stand alone—they make sense. They also are separated by a coordinating conjunction. They need a comma.

Sentence B: Incorrect comma usage: John ran to the store, but walked home. Are both clauses able to stand alone? John ran to the store can stand alone. Walked home cannot stand alone. This sentence has two of the elements—one independent clause and the coordinating conjunction—but lacks one of the key elements. Walked home is not an independent clause; therefore, you will not use a comma in a sentence like this one. In this sentence, John, the subject, performs the actions ran and walked. These two actions, ran and walked, are compound verbs. If you place a comma before the coordinating conjunction, you will have separated the subject, John, from its second verb, walked, and subjects and verbs cannot be separated by only one comma.

Independent Clause + Comma + Coordinating Conjunction + Independent Clause = Compound sentence.

Editing Strategy: 1) locate all coordinating conjunctions, 2) examine the clauses on either side, 3) use a comma if the clauses are both independent, but 4) remove the comma if there is only one independent clause.

A comma splice occurs when you put a comma between two independent clauses that are not separated by a coordinating conjunction.