Introductory Phrases

The most common introductory word groups are phrases and clauses functioning as adverbs. Such word groups when, where, how, why, or under what conditions.

- however
- in addition
- finally
- first
- sometimes
- once a week
- in a while
- behind the scenes
- walking in the forest

Lists

Separate items, ideas, or actions in a series with commas.

- I need to buy milk, eggs, and a new pen.
- He put down the glasses, poured the water, and refilled the pitcher.

Items may be single words, phrases, or clauses. If the items in the list already have commas in them, separate with semi-colons instead.

- Last night, I made chicken, broccoli, and celery; tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil; and cheese, crackers, and salami.

Conjunctions

Commas are commonly used before conjunctions... But not always! Don't worry; here's an easy test for this.

- Take out the conjunction and replace it with a comma.
- Ask yourself if they can stand alone as their own sentence.
- If they can, you need a comma; if not, you don’t.

Example: 

- Joseph went to the writing center and a consultant looked over his paper.
- Take out the conjunction and replace it with a comma.
- Joe went to the writing center and a consultant looked over his paper.
- Are they both full sentences? Can they stand alone?
- In this case, they can stand alone... Add a comma!
- Joseph went to the writing center and a consultant looked over his paper.

This rule also applies for semi-colons. Only use a semi-colon if both sides of the semi-colon can stand alone as their own sentence.