Commas with *And, But, Or*, and Other Coordinating Conjunctions

Sample Errors

**SAMPLE 1:**  
Derek finally finished writing his book of poems but his publisher was not satisfied.

**SAMPLE 2:**  
A moose wandered into town, and scared several kids.

What's the Problem?

Coordinating conjunctions are the most common way of joining two independent clauses (see Lesson 1 for tips on identifying independent clauses). There are seven coordinating conjunctions. The easiest way to remember them is by the acronym FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*

Coordinating conjunctions, or FANBOYS, are punctuated in two different ways depending on what the conjunctions join. When one of the FANBOYS joins two complete independent clauses, put a comma in front of it. In Sample 1, *but* joins two independent clauses, but the comma has been left out. When one of the FANBOYS joins just parts of sentences, do not use a comma. This is the problem in Sample 2, where a comma is mistakenly used with *and* when what follows -scared several kids is only part of a complete sentence and cannot stand alone.

What Causes the Problem?

Writers use commas with FANBOYS depending on whether they join complete sentences or just parts of sentences. The problem, of course, is that first you have to figure out what the FANBOYS join together—complete sentences or just parts of sentences—before you know whether or not to use a comma.

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct all comma errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

When he reached the Americas, Christopher Columbus believed he had reached the East Indies, so he called the people that he found *Indians.* That term is still used but many indigenous people prefer the term *Native Americans.*

We tend to think of Native Americans as a group yet that is really a mistake because there are vast differences in their cultures and languages. We tend to think of the tribes from the plains as being the typical Native Americans for those are the tribes we see represented in movies, and on TV The plains tribes hunted buffalo, and lived in tepees but northwest coastal tribes never saw a buffalo or a tepee in their lives. Instead, hunted whales, and lived in wooden houses. (7)

Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

The following tip helps determine whether you can correctly use a comma with the FANBOYS:

**IMAGINARY PERIOD TIP:** Test each use of FANBOYS by putting an imaginary period right before it. Can BOTH parts that are divided by this imaginary period now stand alone as complete sentences? If both new sentences can stand alone, use a comma with the FANBOYS. If either one of the parts is not a complete sentence, then do not use a comma with the FANBOYS.

You may have heard that it is ungrammatical to begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction (for example, *And she landed a great job after college*), but that is not always true. Many skillful writers use periods with coordinating conjunctions for emphasis, especially with *but* and *yet.* However, as with any technique for adding extra emphasis, use it...
sparingly. The normal and expected punctuation for two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is a comma.

Here is how the Imaginary Period Tip can be applied to the two sample sentences:

**SAMPLE 1:**  
Derek finally finished writing his book of poems but his publisher was not satisfied.

**TIP APPLIED:** Derek finally finished writing his book of poems.  
But his publisher was not satisfied.

**CORRECTION:** Derek finally finished writing his book of poems, but his publisher was not satisfied.

The Imaginary Period Tip confirms that *but* is used with two independent clauses. Correct the sentence to show their relationship by joining the clauses with a comma.

Now turn to the second sample sentence:

**SAMPLE 2:**  
A moose wandered into town, and scared several kids.

**TIP APPLIED:** A moose wandered into town.  
And scared several kids.

**CORRECTION:** A moose wandered into town/ and scared several kids.

The Imaginary Period Tip shows that *and* is not used with two independent clauses. Therefore, do not use a comma with *and.*

### Sentence Practice 1

Correct the comma errors in the following sentences. If there is no error, write OK above the sentence. Confirm your corrections by applying the Imaginary Period Tip.

**EXAMPLE:**  
This paper is torn. But can still be used for scratch paper.

1. Pig iron is refined in a blast furnace, and contains iron along with small amounts of manganese and other minerals.
2. Piero di Cosimo was a Florentine painter, and is remembered for his scenes depicting mythology.
3. Tom decided he would walk to class, but changed his mind when it started raining.
4. You should return this book to the library, or you can renew it by phone.
5. My friend Elise failed her English course last semester for buying a paper off the Internet, and submitting it as her own.

### Sentence Practice 2

Correct the comma errors in the following sentences. If there is no error, write OK above the sentence. Confirm your corrections by applying the Imaginary Period Tip.

**EXAMPLE:** My friend Al didn't need a car, nor could he afford one.

1. Sitting Bull became famous for he appeared with Buffalo Bill in his Wild West Show.
2. The Norman Conquest of England took place in 1066, and brought many changes in English life.
4. Jan asked me to lend her my notes so I did.
5. Tony is dropping by my place and I suppose I should clean up a bit.

**Sentence Practice 3**

Combine each pair of sentences using a coordinating conjunction of your choice. If you want to keep both as independent clauses, you must use a comma with the coordinating conjunction. If you reduce one of the sentences to less than an independent clause, do not use a comma with the coordinating conjunction. See if you can combine them both ways.

**EXAMPLE:**
My hat doesn't fit very well.
It keeps falling off when I ride my bike.

**ANSWER:**
My hat doesn't fit very well, so it keeps falling off when I ride my bike.

1. I may go shopping today.
   I may put it off till tomorrow.

2. Clark looked around.
   Clark then ducked into a phone booth.

3. I asked Scrooge for help.
   All I got was some good advice.

4. Alice wanted to work in an academic environment.
   She got some computer training.

5. Farmer Brown went to the dealership.
   He checked out the new tractors.

**Editing Practice 1**

Correct all errors involving commas and coordinating conjunctions in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.