Comma Use: Coordinating Conjunctions

There are two different comma uses related to coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) that sometimes cause confusion.

**Joining independent clauses**

When a compound sentence (two independent clauses) is formed using a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet), a comma is used before the conjunction.

- Grandmother lost her sight, but her hearing sharpened.
- They moved away two years ago, and I miss them.
- You can learn it now, or you can learn it later.

Note: When clauses are very short, it is acceptable to omit the comma. When in doubt, use the comma; it is never wrong.

**Some Common Mistakes with This Rule:**

The comma goes before the conjunction only, not after it. This would be incorrect:

- *Grandmother lost her sight but, her hearing sharpened.*

This rule applies only when the conjunction joins two independent clauses, not when it joins two words, phrases, or dependent clauses. These are incorrect uses of the comma:

- *Grandmother lost her sight, and her hearing.*
- *Banks, and community groups help the elderly, and eliminate the confusion they often feel.*

**Separating items in a list**

Commas are used to separate items in a series (i.e., a list).

- My hobbies are painting, reading, rollerblading, and stamp collecting.
- We drove to the park, had a picnic, and then came home.
The comma in front of the conjunction is optional, but it is a good idea to use it. It is always correct, and it often prevents confusion.

Her new job involves typing, filing and answering correspondence. (All filing, or only the filing of correspondence?)

The series must have at least three items in it; when there are only two items, don't use a comma.

My hobbies are painting and stamp collecting.

**Some Common Mistake With This Rule:**

There is no comma in front of the series; there is a comma after it only if required by some other rule.

My hobbies are painting, reading, rollerblading, and stamp collecting.  
this comma is incorrect

My hobbies are painting, reading, rollerblading, and stamp collecting, and I spend a lot of time on them.  
this comma is correct

Things like clothes, shoes, and makeup, were all furnished by my mother.  
this comma is incorrect

Notice that two conjunctions, and and or, can occur in both of these situations—hence the potential for confusion. Whenever you use a conjunction, first determine how many items you have:

- if you have more than two items, **always** use commas;
- if you have two items, determine if they are complete sentences or not:
  - if they are complete sentences, use the comma;
  - if they are not complete sentences, omit the comma.
Practice

Decide whether the commas used with conjunctions (and, but, or) are correct or not. (Don't worry about other commas.)

1. When you open up a newspaper, or turn on the television, nine times out of ten, there is a discussion of some sort about the crime rate.

2. My mom's sister is a good example of a nosey neighbor. She loves to listen, and then tell the whole world about it.

3. For a long time, golf has been a way for me to meet friends, have lots of fun, and relax.

4. One reason I love swimming is that it takes everything off my mind. I don't have to worry about work, or my life.

5. I also notice that every evening there will be a yard full of people, but none are from the neighborhood.

6. Instead of parking in the driveway, they park alongside the road, and make it impossible for another car to get by.

Determine where commas need to be added for coordinating conjunctions. (Don't worry about other commas.)

7. Mom didn't pay the credit card bill anymore and payments were piling up. We were killing ourselves just trying to get by on our own and we still are.

8. These neighbors are usually older people who spend their time gardening or mowing the grass.

9. All of these are good qualities in someone but this is not the most admirable quality to me.

10. Someone might stand up for you but you might be a little apprehensive about standing up for them.

11. We can often relate to each other about how golf relaxes us and takes our minds off things.

12. My boyfriend became the only person I was involved with. I moved in with him and we shared living expenses as a married couple would. At first, I couldn't believe all the responsibility. I now had to cook for two clean for two shop for two and worry about someone other than myself. Finally, we became married and a new lifestyle had become my occupation. We were so concerned about food bills and gas money that we didn't have time for anything else.