1. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses (complete sentences with subjects/verbs) joined by a coordinating conjunction (e.g., but, and, or, nor, so, yet, for).

   {example} Clarice wanted to complete her FBI training, but she could not refuse the opportunity to have a pleasant chat with Dr. Lector.

2. Do not, however, join two sentences (independent clauses) with only a comma or with no punctuation; such an error is called a comma splice or a fused sentence. To correct these errors, try one of these methods: use a comma with one of the coordinating conjunctions listed above; use a period to end each sentence; use a semicolon to link closely related independent clauses together into one sentence; subordinate one clause to a main independent clause.

   {examples} At the beginning of Terminator 2, Arnold's character seemed like a blast from the past (or future), but as the movie developed, so did he.
   Thelma and Louise needed to change their situations; their journey was funny, wild, and poignant.

3. Conjunctive adverbs, such as "however," "moreover," "thus," "consequently," "nevertheless," and "therefore" are used to show continuity and are frequently set off by commas when used early in a sentence.

   {examples} Moreover, I cannot stand people who talk constantly during the film.
   He discovered, however, that she loved Raisinettes.

4. Avoid using a conjunctive adverb (e.g., "however") as a coordinating conjunction to link two independent clauses, with or without a comma. Use a semicolon before the conjunctive adverb.

   {example} He dies at the end of the film; however, he does take the other guy with him.

5. Use commas to set off nonessential phrases and clauses.

   {example} Herbert, a young man of simple tastes, believes Bruce Willis is God's gift to the cinema.

6. Use a comma to set off dialogue from the speaker.

   {example} I left the theater, turned to my partner, and said, "Was it good for you?"

7. Use a semicolon in a series of items that already contain internal punctuation (e.g., commas).

   {example} Her children were born a year apart: Moe, 1936; Curly, 1937; Larry, 1938.

8. Use a colon to introduce a long or formal list, but do not use one after "to be" verbs.

   {example} Here are the ingredients for a hit film: conflict, desire, suspense, violence or the threat of violence, reconciliation, regret, and hope.

9. Use a colon to introduce a word, phrase, or sentence that explains, summarizes, or amplifies the preceding clause.

   {example} After I had left the theater, I realized I had left two things behind: my popcorn and my innocence.

10. Use dashes to set off an idea or interrupting examples that deserve more emphasis than parentheses denote or where colons would seem too formal.

    {example} She was startled by a sound from the basement--a faint moan.
    One could enumerate his various qualities--voice, good humor, looks--but we still need a woman to play Nora.

11. Use a dash before a summary statement or to indicate a break in thought.

    {example} Wine, food, the film, the rest--the evening was perfect.

12. Remember to mark possessives with apostrophes before or after an "s" to indicate ownership. Add an apostrophe plus "s" to most singular nouns and to plural nouns that do not end in "s."

    {examples} the film's conclusion; the women's room

Singular nouns that end in s or z may take either an apostrophe plus "s" or the apostrophe alone--just use one form or the other consistently in an essay.

    {examples} the boss's attitude; the boss' attitude
                the Boz's attitude; the Boz' attitude

Add an apostrophe (but not an "s") to plural nouns that end in "s."

    {examples} students' opinions; critics' views