THE TEN (COMMA)NDMENTS

Comma Rule 1: Use a comma after an introductory element (word, phrase, or clause) that is not the subject of the sentence. If the introductory element is less than five words, then the comma may be optional.

§1. When Odysseus strings his legendary bow, Homer’s language transforms him into a musician playing upon a deadly instrument. (Place a comma after the subordinate clause to signal the start of the main clause.)
§2. At this moment Odysseus becomes a musician playing his deadly instrument. (The comma is optional after the short prepositional phrase ending in “moment.”)
§3. Thinking back on the twenty years they have lost, Odysseus and Penelope weep.
§4. Thinking back on the twenty years they have lost causes Odysseus and Penelope to weep. (Note: “Thinking . . . lost” is a noun phrase functioning as the subject of the sentence.)

Comma Rule 2: Use a comma in front of coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet) that join two complete sentences (i.e., independent clauses plus any dependent elements).

§1. Odysseus loves Penelope, and he also loves his life of adventure.
§2. Odysseus loves his life of adventure, but he loves Penelope more.
§3. Odysseus loves his life of adventure but loves Penelope more. (See Rule 10b.)

Comma Rule 3: Use a comma or commas to set off transitional expressions (however, therefore, moreover, for example, on the other hand, in fact, etc.).

§1. On the one hand, Odysseus loves Penelope and wants to return to her.
§2. His love of fame and adventure, however, overshadows his love for his wife.
§3. Therefore, one may interpret The Odyssey as a coming-home narrative.

Comma Rule 4: Use a semi-colon and then a comma around transitional expressions that connect two independent clauses.

§1. Odysseus loves Penelope and wants to return to her; however, he loves fame and adventure, too.
§2. Odysseus actively participates in the myth-making process; therefore, whenever his various hosts ask him to share his story, he jumps at the opportunity.

Comma Rule 5: Use a comma after each item in a series. Also, note that items in a series must be parallel. The last serial comma cannot be omitted unless all the items are connected by the word “and.”

§1. Penelope has fabulous hair, a nice figure, and a lovely smile.
§2. While Odysseus is away, Penelope raises a son, runs a household, and stalls the suitors.
§3. “I feel pretty, oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and gay,” sings Maria.

Comma Rule 6: Use commas to set off nonessential (nonrestrictive) additions to a sentence. Do not use commas to set off essential (restrictive) words, phrases, or clauses.

§1. Nonrestrictive: The scene where Odysseus describes how he carved his wedding bed out of a living olive tree, which always moves audiences to tears, is the climax of book 23.
§2. Restrictive: A scene that always moves audiences to tears involves Odysseus describing the construction of his wedding bed as rooted in the earth.
§3. Nonrestrictive: One of the suitors, the cruel Antinoos, throws a stool at Odysseus.
§4. Restrictive: The cruel suitor Antinoos throws a stool at Odysseus. (Putting commas around “Antinoos” would imply that he is the only cruel suitor.)
§5. Restrictive: The Greek poet Homer wrote The Odyssey. (There are many Greek poets.)
Comma Rule 7: Add a comma between coordinate adjectives, which are adjectives that can be joined by and. Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives, which are adjectives that cannot be joined by and.

§1. The intelligent, persistent, faithful Penelope holds off the suitors until Odysseus returns. (Here, one uses a comma because the adjectives are coordinate, since “and” can be used instead of the comma.)
§2. A beautiful Greek goddess holds Odysseus captive. (Here, the comma is omitted because the adjectives are cumulative, since one would not say, “A beautiful and Greek goddess.”)

Comma Rule 8: Use a comma or commas to separate a direct quotation from the rest of the sentence (examples 1 and 2), unless the quotation is preceded by a complete sentence; in that case, use a colon (example 3). If the word “that” precedes the quotation, then omit the comma (example 4).

§1. Odysseus tricks the Cyclops when he declares, “My name is Nohbody” (Odyssey 9.398).
§2. Mom always instructed, “Don’t play ball in the house.”
§3. Odysseus, a trickster figure and a master of deception, fools the Cyclops into calling him a name that hides his identity: “My name is Nohbody: mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbody” (9.398–399).
§4. Odysseus tricks the Cyclops when he declares that his “name is Nohbody” (book 9, line 398).

Comma Rule 9: Learn to recognize and avoid comma splices. A comma splice occurs when two complete sentences are joined by a mere comma, creating a run-on sentence. Repair comma splices in one of four ways: (1) add a conjunction after the comma; (2) turn the comma into a period and begin a new sentence; (3) turn the comma into a semi-colon; (4) turn one of the sentences into a dependent clause.

➤ Comma-splice: Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, Aeneas accepts his fate.

§1. Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, but Aeneas accepts his fate.
§2. Odysseus questions the gods’ motives. Aeneas accepts his fate.
§3. Odysseus questions the gods’ motives; Aeneas accepts his fate.
§4. While Odysseus questions the gods’ motives, Aeneas accepts his fate.

Comma Rule 10: Thou shalt not put commas where they do not belong.

a. Do not separate major elements of a sentence, especially the subject and verb.
   ➤ Not this: Odysseus’s trait, the most annoying one, is bragging about his achievements.
   ✔ Try this: Odysseus’s most annoying trait is bragging about his achievements.

b. Do not use a comma before a conjunction if an independent clause does not follow it.
   ➤ Not this: Odysseus mourns his captivity each day, and succumbs to Circe each night.
   ✔ Try this: Odysseus mourns his captivity each day and succumbs to Circe each night.

c. Do not add a comma after the final item in a series.
   ➤ Not this: Odysseus’s men die at the hands of Cyclops, Laestrygones, and Scylla, during their journey home.
   ✔ Try this: Odysseus’s men die at the hands of Cyclops, Laestrygones, and Scylla during their journey home.