SECTION 4: COMMAS, CLAUSES AND PHRASES

Groups of words with subjects and verbs are called clauses; word groupings without subjects and verbs are phrases. "He won the race" and "after she was re-elected" are clauses. They have subjects and verbs. "In the last quarter" and "after running the race" are phrases.

**Independent clauses** express complete thoughts and therefore can be complete sentences:

The mayor sued the paper.

*Mayor* is the subject of the clause; *sued* is the verb. Independent clauses can have more than one subject:

The mayor and the City Council sued the paper.

Both mayor and council are subjects of the clause, and *sued* is the verb. Independent clauses can also have more than one verb:

The mayor read the story and then decided to sue the paper.

*Mayor* is the subject of the sentence. The verbs are *read* and *decided*. The mayor did both of those actions. There's no comma before *and* because mayor is the subject of both verbs.

**When two or more independent clauses** are in the same sentence, some writers have trouble with the punctuation. For example, "Northern State's Blasters are ranked 20th in the nation by the AP this week" is an independent clause. "NSU's Moe Collins was named coach of the week by USA Today" is also an independent clause. If we combine them in one sentence, we get:

Northern State's Blasters are ranked 20th in the nation by the AP this week, and NSU's Moe Collins was named coach of the week by USA Today.

Notice that when we combine two long independent clauses, we must put a comma before the conjunction. If we combine the two clauses without a conjunction such as "and" or "but," we need to use a semicolon instead of a comma:

Northern State had its best season in years; Southern State lost every game.

A semicolon is also used when two independent clauses are connected with a conjunctive adverb, such as *however*. Notice that a comma goes after *however*:

Northern State had its best season in years; however, many alumni wanted to fire Coach Moe Collins.

More commonly, journalists use two sentences:

Northern State had its best season in years. However, many alumni wanted to fire Coach Moe Collins.

**Dependent clauses** are groups of words that have subjects and verbs but don't seem to be complete thoughts. For example, "After the mayor read the story" is a clause. It has a subject (*mayor*) and a verb
(read), but it's not a complete thought. It depends on another clause to make sense. If we add a dependent clause to an independent clause, we get perfectly fine sentences:

After the mayor read the story, she sued the paper.
The mayor sued the paper after she read the story.

Dependent clauses often begin with subordinating conjunctions such as after, before, while, or with relative pronouns such as that, who, whom, which. In the following examples, the dependent clauses are in italics.

While she was running for mayor, Simms discovered she had skin cancer.
He was a has-been before he got to enjoy his stardom.
The restaurant that the health department closed last month has filed for bankruptcy.
Ma's Supper Bar, which the health department closed last month, has filed for bankruptcy.

Prepositional phrases, discussed previously, are rarely set off by commas.

Not: Johnson entered the Democratic primary, in 1964.
But: Johnson entered the Democratic primary in 1964.

However, when attribution is provided using a prepositional phrase beginning with according to, the phrase is normally set off. Also, long prepositional phrases at the beginning of sentences may be set off.

Not: Branson was never charged with a crime according to court records.
But: Branson was never charged with a crime, according to court records.

Not: In the year after the World War II started building ships became a national priority.
But: In the year after the World War II started, building ships became a national priority.

Participle phrases begin with a verb form called a participle. Participles often end in -ing. However, because they are verbs, they can also be in the past tense and end in -ed or other letters. Here are some sentences with participle phrases. When participle phrases are at the beginning of a sentence, they are usually set off by commas. In the following sentences, needing, wanted and sensing are participles. The participle phrases are in italics:

Needing to graduate in the fall, he attended summer school.
Wanted by the FBI, he tried to obtain a phony passport.
The attorney, sensing her client was nervous, asked for a recess.

When phrases are the subject of the sentence, do not put a comma after them.

Not: Losing the Indiana primary, was a major setback.
But: Losing the Indiana primary was a major setback.