SECTION 6: COMMAS AND NONESSENTIAL INFORMATION

No commas are used with essential clauses and phrases. They give information that is essential in identifying the nouns they modify, as in this example:

Students who have not paid their fees will be expelled.

Of all the students on campus, who will be expelled? Only the ones who have not paid their fees. The clause who have not paid their fees is essential. Another example:

The company that made the game has been sued for $10 million.

There are lots of companies. Which one has been sued for $10 million? The one that made the game. The clause that made the game is considered essential because it narrows our understanding of which company has been sued. Phrases can also be essential, as in this sentence:

He said he puts his money in the bank offering the best deal.

The phrase offering the best deal helps identify the kind of bank the man will use.

Nonessential clauses and phrases are set off by commas. These clauses and phrases provide interesting—even highly relevant—information, but the information is not essential to helping us understand who or what is being written about, as in the following sentences:

Consolidated Toy Company, which made the game, has been sued for $10 million.
Courtney Black, who has not paid her tuition, may be expelled.
He decided to put his money in Merchants National Bank, which offered him the best deal.

Appositives can also be essential or nonessential. Appositives are words or phrases that come after nouns. They are set off by commas when they are nonessential. They are not set off by commas when they are essential, as in these examples.

Essential appositive: Woody Allen’s movie “Sleeper” is studied in film classes.
Nonessential appositive: Jackson, an attorney from Chicago, will represent him.

Allen made many movies. The appositive Sleeper is essential to identifying which movie is being studied. In the second sentence, the name Jackson identifies the man. The appositive an attorney from Chicago gives interesting information, but it is not essential to identifying him. Two more examples:

Bender’s mother, Gladys Knight, attended the ceremony.
Bender’s son John said he liked growing up in a large family with six brothers.

Bender has only one mother. Her name isn’t needed to identify her. But because Bender has several sons, the name is essential to identifying which son is being quoted.

That and which. Nonessential clauses that modify things usually begin with which. They never begin with that. Essential clauses almost always begin with that. (They can start with which if the word that has already appeared in the passage several times.) Here are some examples:
Essential: The company that invents a pocket-sized computer will make lots of money.
Nonessential: Acme Computer Corp., which invented a pocket-sized computer, made lots of money.

When clauses modify people, they begin with who or whom, never that or which. Use commas with nonessential clauses.

Not: Any driver that refuses to wear seat belts should be fined.
But: Any driver who refuses to wear seat belts should be fined.

Essential: Any boxer who can knock out Duke Jones should be considered a contender.
Nonessential: Sly Dixon, who knocked out Duke Jones, should be considered a contender.

The choice of who and whom is made easier now that you understand clauses and phrases. Who is used for subjects of clauses and whom is used for objects. The first step is to isolate the clause or phrase. Look at these three sentences:

He sold drugs to whoever had the money.
He sold the drugs to whom?
To whom did he sell the drugs?

In the first sentence, the who/whom choice is in the clause whoever had the money. Because the who/whom choice is the subject of the clause, whoever is correct. Don’t let the preposition to confuse you. The whole clause is the object of the preposition to. In the second and third sentences, we use whom because it is the object of the preposition to. Read this pair of sentences:

The attorney works hard for whoever pays him.
The attorney works hard for whomever he represents.

In the first sentence, the whoever/whomever choice is the subject of the verb pays in the clause whoever pays him. In the second sentence, whomever is direct object of the verb represents. In normal word order, the clause would read: he represents whomever. In both sentences, the clauses are the objects of the preposition for.

Confused by subjects and objects? A simple substitution may help. Substitute he for who and him for whom. Select the one that sounds right.

The candidate who/whom wins in Iowa is likely to be elected president.

Substituting he and him for who or whom, we get either he wins in Iowa or him wins in Iowa. He sounds better, so the correct choice is who. You still have to put the words in the normal word order.

The ACLU said it would represent whoever/whomever police arrested.

The whoever/whomever choice is in the clause whoever/whomever police arrested. Put the clause in normal word order: police arrested whoever/whomever. Substitute he and him. Police arrested him sounds better than police arrested he. The correct choice is whomever.