

**Forest Service Handbook
National Headquarters - Washington Office
Washington, DC**

**Forest Service Handbook 6209.12 – Correspondence Handbook
Chapter 40 - Writing Tips and Style Practices**

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Digest: Following is an explanation of the changes throughout the directive by section.

6209.12: Revises entire handbook with extensive edits throughout.

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40.8 - References

See FSM 6220.8 for a full list of reference sources.

As its primary source for style guidance, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service follows the U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual.

There are some rules or guidelines that contradict the GPO Style Manual, but which are Forest Service or USDA preference. These are identified where they appear. Note: Forest Service and USDA preferences are subject to change. Contact the ORMS correspondence team for the most up-to-date guidance.

In accordance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, writers should strive for clarity and directness when communicating government information. Writers should organize their material carefully and consider the needs and knowledge of their audience.

41 - Current Forest Service and USDA Style Guidelines

41.1 - Structure and Content

1. Be concise. Responses must fit onto 1 or 2 pages. If more space is needed, a briefing paper accompanied by a cover letter will be used.

Note: The format for a briefing paper is not prescribed. However, in general, it should be formal, professional, and self-contained. For example, titles, headings, captions, dates, and statements of responsibility should be included, as needed, to identify the contents and origin of the material in the document.

2. Be helpful. Answer the core question(s) of the incoming letter, directly and unambiguously. If the response is negative, try to include some positive alternatives.

3. Don't be repetitive. Try not to repeat what was in the incoming letter, beyond what is necessary to establish context for the response.

4. Avoid unnecessary jargon or technical language.

5. Do more than just give empty referrals or vague promises of a follow-up. If a full response will require more time, provide an interim response acknowledging receipt of the letter and stating the date when a full response can be expected.

6. Try to arrange the letter so that the key points, such as any findings, recommendations, or proposed actions, will be prominent and easy for the reader to find (in a stand-alone paragraph, at the end of the letter, in a list, or other prominent location).

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7. If the response will be sent more than one month after the date on the incoming letter (regardless of when the letter was actually received), add to the end of the opening paragraph: “I apologize for the delayed response.”
8. Use standard openings and closings.
9. Current preference is to refer to “your letter *of* [date],” not “your letter *dated* [date].”

41.2 - Formatting

1. Standard spacing is single-spaced, with one blank line between each paragraph. Paragraphs are not indented.
2. Page margins are 1 inch on all sides.
3. Each sentence is followed by two spaces.
4. The salutation in a formal letter is followed by a colon (:), not a comma (,).

Dear Senator McCain:

Dear Mr. Johnson:

5. At the letter’s end, “Sincerely” is followed by four blank lines, then the signature block.
6. The signature block consists of the signer’s name in ALL CAPS, followed on the next line or lines by the signer’s title and position in standard capitalization.
7. The wet signature will go above the signature block.
8. Email messages must include a standard signature, using the approved formatting outlined in chapter 30, sections 33.2.
9. When writing an email, be sure to provide an informative subject line. If the reader is unable to make an accurate prediction of what the message will be about, the letter may invite misreading or misunderstanding, or it may be ignored altogether.

41.3 - Capitalization

1. Capitalize “Agency” when it is a synonym for the Forest Service or some other specific agency (previously referenced). Otherwise, use lowercase when a general agency is intended.
2. Capitalize “National Forest,” and capitalize the word “Forest” when it is a synonym for a specific National Forest (previously referenced).

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Officials on the Monongahela National Forest issued a notice about recent bear encounters. Visitors to the Forest should exercise caution.

3. Capitalize “Nation” when it is a synonym for the United States or some other specific sovereign nation. Likewise, capitalize “State,” “Tribe,” or “Tribal” when they are in reference to specific sovereign entities.
4. Capitalize “Chief,” “Deputy Chief,” “Director,” or “Assistant Director” when they refer to specific individuals or positions within the Forest Service or another agency.
5. Capitalize “Congress” or “Congressional” when they are in reference to official names or activities of the legislature of the United States or some other nation.
6. Capitalize “Federal” when it is in reference to the Government of the United States or another sovereign nation.
7. The Forest Service has adopted some special capitalization rules for use in directives. See FSH 1109.12, section 14, exhibit 01, and sections 14.1 and 14.2. These do not apply to correspondence.

41.4 - Acronyms

1. Do not use the acronym “FS” for “Forest Service.”
2. Do not use the acronym “NF” for “National Forest.”
3. Do not use an acronym for the name of a National Forest. For example, use “Gallatin National Forest,” not “Gallatin NF” or “GNF.”

41.5 - Other Department Guidelines

1. Do not refer to the “U.S. Forest Service.” Instead, use “Forest Service” “the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service,” or “USDA’s Forest Service.” (Note: Current Departmental preference is to use the possessive “USDA’s Forest Service” rather than “USDA Forest Service.”)
2. Use the term “this Administration” or “the Administration” when referring to a policy or decision by the President or White House; use “this Department” or “the Department” (or “the USDA”) when referring to a policy or decision by the Secretary or the Department.

41.6 - Letters for the Secretary of Agriculture’s Signature

1. Use the first person, as though the Secretary himself (or herself) were writing the response.

2. Use more first person singular (“I”) than plural (“we”).
3. Remember that the Secretary is speaking for the USDA, and for the Forest Service as a part of the USDA. Some distinction may be necessary, depending on the context, between the actions or intentions of the Agency and the Department.
4. Don’t commit the Secretary to anything without approval.

42 - General Style Guidelines

42.1 - Capitalization

In addition to the rules outlined in Section 41.3 of this Handbook, observe the following general guidelines:

1. Capitalize the first letter of the first word in a sentence.
2. Capitalize a proper name that is a specific, one-of-a-kind name for a person (“Dorothy Jane Smith,” or “Professor Smith,” as opposed to just “my professor”), place (“Yellowstone National Park,” as opposed to just “a park”), or thing (“the Hope Diamond,” as opposed to just “a diamond”).
3. The personal pronoun “I” is always capitalized.
4. In titles, headings, or subheadings, always capitalize the first letter of the first word. Then, capitalize the first letter of each main word (excluding minor words like “the” or “a”).
5. Capitalize the first letter of the names of directions when they indicate well known geographic and cultural areas or regions, but not when they merely provide geographical direction.

Stanley Basin is an example of a place surrounded by steep mountains in the *West*. It lies *west* of Montana and *east* of Boise.

6. Also capitalize: the names of buildings, universities, and schools; months, days of the week, and holidays; historic events, such as wars or time periods; trade names; organizations, companies, and agencies; geological eras, periods, systems, series, epochs, and ages; proper names within a species (such as “Douglas fir”); and names of ships, aircraft, and spacecraft.

42.2 - Acronyms

1. Spell out on the first occurrence, with the acronym in parentheses (“the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)”), and then use just the acronym thereafter (“the USDA”).

2. Once you begin using an acronym, be consistent; don't switch back and forth.
3. Use of an acronym is not mandatory. If the acronym will occur only a few times in the document, or if clarity will be aided by not using it, then don't use it.
4. Keep in mind the restrictions listed in section 41.4.

42.3 - Must, Should, May

1. Use "must" or "shall" for obligations. "Must" is used in reference to objects, "shall" in reference to people. Use "must not" or "shall not" for prohibitions.
2. Use "should" or "ought" for recommendations or best practices.
3. Use "may" for optional, discretionary choices.

43 - General Writing Tips

43.1 - Know Your Reader

1. Think about the recipient of the response; think about what they are looking for, what will interest them, what they do or do not already know, and what level of contextual background or technical detail will be suitable or necessary to aid their comprehension.
2. Scan the incoming correspondence to identify specific information the sender wants.
3. Identify the question(s) the sender is really asking, directly or indirectly.
4. Organize the material in the response in the same order as the questions or requests in the incoming letter.

43.2 - Sentences

1. Express one idea in each sentence, or a series of closely related ideas.
2. Whenever possible, use simple, direct sentences and phrasing.
3. Use a variety of sentence lengths and structures to avoid short, choppy phrasing, but avoid very lengthy, multi-clause sentences. When in doubt, break a long sentence down into shorter sentences.
4. Use effective transitions (however, nevertheless, yet, similarly, what's more, therefore, finally, and so forth) to clarify the flow of ideas between one sentence and the next, or one paragraph and the next.

43.3 - Paragraphs and Sections

1. Limit each paragraph to one topic, or even to one subsection of a topic. When in doubt, break a long paragraph up into shorter paragraphs.
2. Try to begin each new paragraph with a sentence that marks a logical and coherent starting point for the idea(s) contained in that paragraph.
3. Whenever possible, break up a long document into shorter, self-contained, focused, and logically-organized sections. This will be easier for the reader to follow and understand.

43.4 - Emphasis Techniques

1. You may wish to use a full range of emphasis techniques, such as lists, bullet points, section headings, single-sentence paragraphs, boldface, and italics, to draw the reader's attention to important points or passages.
2. However, do not use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS (unless with a very good reason). Text that is exclusively in capital letters is much harder to read, and in current online usage it signifies "yelling."
3. Overuse of some or all of the above techniques will very quickly become distracting and counterproductive. Special emphasis only works if used sparingly; if everything is emphasized, then nothing is.

43.5 - Active vs. Passive Sentence Construction

Note the difference between active and passive construction. Using active construction means the subject comes before the verb, and the verb describes an action of the subject. This will usually result in stronger writing, with a clearer sense of *who* performed the action in question.

The *Forest Service* issued the report yesterday, and *we* mailed a copy to you.

(Passive: The report was issued; a copy was mailed.)

Officer Johnson saw Mr. Smith riding away on his ATV at a high rate of speed.

(Passive: Mr. Smith was seen riding away.)

There are times when passive construction may prove useful, such as to obscure questions of individual blame or responsibility or to place more emphasis on what was done, rather than who did it. There are also times when it may be unavoidable, such as when an action is performed without any obvious person or thing being responsible.

44 - Style and Usage Practices

44.1 - Italics

1. Italicize the Latin names of genera and species, for example, *Robinia pseudoacacia* (genus and species for the black locust tree). Names of broader taxonomic categories, such as kingdom, phyla, class, order, or family, are not italicized, nor are the names of more specific categories such as varieties or subspecies. For example, the name of the family that includes the black locust tree would be written “Fabaceae,” with the first letter capitalized but no italicization.
2. Italicize the titles of books, magazines, newspapers, movies, plays, and other works individually produced or published, for example: *Trees of the United States*, *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Star Wars*, *Hamlet*. (Note: The names of sub-parts, such as chapters or articles, are identified with quotation marks, not italics.)
3. Use italics for most foreign words or phrases, as well as their abbreviations, such as: *ante*, *post*, *et seq.*, *ibid.*, *a priori*, *ex post facto*, *in situ*, *carte blanche*.
4. The names of legal cases are italicized, except for the “v,” which is not: *John Doe v. Richard Roe*.
5. A letter used as a symbol is italicized: “Let’s say we have *X* dollars.”

44.2 - Abbreviations and Acronyms

1. When carefully used, abbreviations and acronyms can enhance readability and reduce unnecessary repetition. However, they can also cause confusion if overused or used carelessly.
2. When first using an abbreviation or acronym, spell it out completely and enclose the shortened version in parentheses. Thereafter, use only the shortened form. If the document is very lengthy, and a reader might begin reading at some point midway through, the abbreviation or acronym may be re-defined when necessary, such as at the beginning of each new section.
3. To create the plural of an acronym, add a small “s” (without an apostrophe):

Contracting Officer Representatives – CORs
Draft Environmental Impact Statements – DEISs.
4. To create the possessive of an acronym, add a small “s” *with* an apostrophe: “the USDA’s recent decision,” “the FDA’s current guidelines.”

44.3 - Numerals

1. Numbers under 10 are spelled out, except when they express time, money, or physical measurement (which are always typed as numerals):

Six teams of three people will be employed by the Caribou National Forest for prescribed burning. Each 3-person team can burn 30 acres of the 200,000 acres within the Forest's boundaries every 2 years.

2. Use numerals for any number of 10 or more:

The Forest relies on more than 180 dedicated employees to care for the land; only three of these employees have been found guilty of misconduct.

3. Always spell out a number at the beginning of a sentence:

Eighteen or 19 people were present at the meeting.

4. More detailed instructions may be found in the GPO Style Manual.

44.4 - Word Division Across Line Breaks

1. Do not separate words that are closely associated with one another, such as the elements of dates and proper names (January 3, 2009; Mr. John Smith), groups of initials and surnames (Mr. B.F.F. Smithfield), abbreviated titles (Dr. Smithers, M.D., Ph.D.), or (whenever possible) organizational names (U.S. Department of Agriculture).

2. If a break is necessary, try to place it between sub-units of a name:

....which is why the U.S. Department of Agriculture's
Office of the Inspector General got involved in the dispute.

3. Do not separate figures, letters, or symbols from their accompanying words when used as a group.

45 - Words to Watch Out For

45.1 - A Lot

“A lot” is two words. It is not a single word.

NOT: “Alot”

45.2 - Lie and Lay

1. “Lie” is a verb that can stand alone (or lie alone). The thing to remember is, the item that lies down is *oneself* (or *itself*, or *themselves*), and this remains unstated, implied:

I believe I will *lie* down for a while.

The book is *lying* on the table.

2. “Lay” is a verb that needs something else to follow it in order for the sentence to be complete. One must lay [something] down, and the something must be stated. Substitute the verb “put” for “lay,” and if it fits, the correct verb to use is “lay.”

When she comes in, Linda will probably *lay* the books on the table, next to where Sue *laid* those reams of paper yesterday.

Did you *lay* out the trays of appetizers?

Consider: I will *lie* down.
I will *lay* my body down.

45.3 - Affect and Effect

Is the word you’re looking for a noun or a verb?

1. “Affect” is almost always used as a *verb*, meaning “to change, impact, alter, or influence” something:

Smoking *affects* health.

The weather *affects* our mood.

It can also have a slightly different, emotion-related meaning: “To act, bluff, counterfeit, fake, feign, pretend, or put on”:

Brenda will *affect* a British accent when she talks to her doorman.

“Affect” can be used as a noun, but only when the subject is psychology.

2. “Effect” is usually used as a *noun*, meaning “something brought about, a result, a change”:

What *effect* will the new policy have on children?

We shouldn't do this if we can't predict the *effects*.

As a verb, "effect" means "to produce a result; to cause something to occur; to bring about an outcome":

I hope the new leadership will *effect* an immediate change in the permit procedures.

45.4 - It's and Its

"It's" is a contraction of "it is." "Its" indicates possession.

It's a shame how bad the old mill looks. It really shows *its* age.

From the first time I visited the house, I've found *its* history intriguing. Did you know *it's* supposed to be haunted?

45.5 - Capital and Capitol

"Capital" means "the central city of a state or country," as well as "money, wealth, or assets," and also "excellent, first-rate, or serious." A "capitol" is "the main government building where a legislative body meets (in the capital)." Remember that the *capitol* has an "o," and it's the building with the *dome*.

Salem is the *capital* of Oregon.

Lisa had to spend most of her hard-earned *capital* to buy a condo close to her office, near the *capitol* in Salem.

45.6 - Between and Among

"Between" is used for two things. "Among" is used for three or more.

Among the six people present on the expedition, two were biologists. And *between* the two of them, they did all the work.

Her earring fell *between* two bar stools. She couldn't find it, so it lay there *among* the other bits of trash, dropped food, and lost objects.

45.7 - Fewer and Less

"Fewer" refers to individual things that can be counted. "Less" refers to a mass amount or quantity, something which can't be subdivided or counted individually, or to an abstract or intangible quality.

There were *fewer* than 30 people at the meeting, so it seemed a lot *less* crowded.

I've been spending *less* time watching TV, since there are *fewer* good shows on.

Doesn't it seem like there is *less* trash on the beach today? Or at least *fewer* broken bottles?

45.8 - Who and Whom

The key distinction to keep in mind is: “who” functions grammatically as a *subject*, while “whom” functions as an *object*. “Who” does something; whereas something is done to “whom.” Since the same distinction can be applied to the words “he” and “him,” you can test which one is correct by substituting “he/she” for “who” and “him/her” for “whom.”

Who/Whom was responsible for this decision?

He was responsible. (Therefore, “*Who* was responsible?” would be correct.)

To *who/whom* should I write?

You should write to *him*. (Therefore, “To *whom* should I write?” would be correct.)

The person *who/whom* I most admire has just disappointed me.

I most admire *her*. (Therefore, “The person *whom* I most admire...” would be correct.)

In practice, “whom” is often not used, and it will sound old-fashioned and slightly fussy to many speakers and readers. In formal writing, however, the distinction should still be observed.

45.9 - That, Which, and Who

These are three of the most useful, used, misused, and overused words in the English language. Their usage is somewhat dictated by convention, but there are rules (and reasons for the rules). It's often possible to omit these words entirely, but be careful not to cause confusion; sometimes they're necessary, or at least useful, to clarify relationships between things.

One rule is: when referring to people, use *who*, not *that* or *which*.

Wrong: The person *that* I asked didn't seem to know the answer.

Right: The person *who* I asked didn't seem to know the answer.

Better: The person I asked didn't seem to know the answer.

Wrong: Visitors *that* are unable to swim should exercise caution.

Right: Visitors *who* are unable to swim should exercise caution.

Possibly confusing: Visitors unable to swim should exercise caution.

Another rule to keep in mind: *which* generally follows a comma, while *that* does not, because *which* is used with *nonrestrictive clauses*, while *that* is used with *restrictive clauses*.

A *restrictive clause* provides essential information, information that specifies or clarifies who or what is being referred to and that would impede understanding if it were removed.

Give me the book *that* has a big red sticker on the front.

Which book? *That* book, the one with the sticker.

A *nonrestrictive clause* provides extra information, information that could be removed without causing serious confusion or ambiguity. The clause is set off, at beginning and end, with commas.

Look at this book, *which* I just got in the mail.

Consider the difference:

All of the houses *that* were made of wood are gone. (The ones made of brick are still standing.)

All of the houses, *which* were made of wood, are gone. (All of the houses are gone; there were no other houses.)

46 - Punctuation

Punctuation is like the system of road signs and signals: it helps a reader follow the sentence without going astray, having to backtrack, or getting stuck in a ditch. Like road signs, it should not be used excessively, but it must be present when needed.

46.1 - Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used for contractions and for possessives. Occasionally, it is used to show a plural.

1. When used in a contraction, an apostrophe indicates omitted letters, for example: *can't* for *cannot*, *you're* for *you are*, *don't* for *do not*. Avoid the use of contractions in formal writing.
2. When used to show possession, add an apostrophe and an *s*.

This is *Katrina's* red ball; the yellow one is the *other girl's*.

This is true even if the word already ends with an *s* (although not everyone does this).

Have you seen *Cass's* ball?

3. If the noun is plural, with an *s* at the end of the word, possession is shown by adding only an apostrophe.

Those are the *boys'* new bicycles.

Did I forget to sign off on my *employees'* bonuses?

4. The apostrophe is used to show a plural only with letters or initials, and it should be used in such cases only if necessary as a help to the reader.

The teacher gave most of her students *A's*. None received *D's* or *F's*.

Mind your *p's* and *q's*.

If an apostrophe were not used, the words would like *As* and *Ds* and *Fs* or *ps* and *qs*, creating confusion for the reader. As for single numbers, using the apostrophe for plurals is optional: *4's* or *4s*; *11's* or *11s*.

5. The apostrophe is *not* used to show the possessive of personal pronouns: *yours*, *theirs*, *its*, *his*, *hers*, *ours*.

46.2 - Colons and Semicolons

As a mark of punctuation, the *colon* generally introduces something. Think of it as like an arrow, pointing ahead to what comes next.

The National Forest boasted three valleys: a wide one, a narrow one, and one that was 25 miles long.

Joe has a dream: to finish his work just once before noon.

The primary question is: "Does the agency really care about the outcome of this matter?"

The *semicolon* is like an enhanced *comma*, linking and separating a series of parallel thoughts or items. Note: A semicolon does not represent the end of a sentence, so the word following a semicolon is not capitalized unless it is a proper noun or the personal pronoun *I*.

One common use is to link two short independent clauses (which could be separate sentences) in a single sentence, in a grammatically correct way:

It rained last night; today there are gigantic puddles everywhere.

Another common use is in place of commas to separate the items in a list, where some of the items themselves include commas:

Susan’s new office furniture will include two ornately decorated tables; a red, white, and blue chair; a desk that is much too large; and two tall cabinets.

46.3 - Quotation Marks

1. Use quotation marks to indicate a direct quote:

Ranger Johnson said, “The investigation is still ongoing at this time.”

Note that the period is placed *inside* the closing quotation mark. If the quote comes earlier in the sentence, it would end with a comma (inside the quotation mark) rather than a period.

“The investigation is still ongoing at this time,” said Ranger Johnson.

2. Use quotation marks to enclose the title of an article, section, song, chapter, or other sub-part of a larger work.

Look in the “Soil Types” section for the information you need.

I think “In My Life” is the best song on *Rubber Soul*.

(Note: The names of larger, separate, individual works are identified with italics or underlining, not quotation marks.)

3. Use quotation marks to identify unusual words or words that are used in a special sense, including a deliberately ironic sense.

The tree was suffering from what is known as “girdling.”

The “belligerence” exhibited by the officers was understandable, considering the circumstances.

46.4 - Commas

There are some simple rules on the use of commas. Most of these rules are fixed. However, there may be some flexibility, depending on which reference publication is used.

1. Commas in a series. Use commas to separate all items in a series (a list containing three or more items), including the final item (before the word “and”). This final comma (also known as the “serial comma” or “Oxford comma”) is sometimes considered

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optional, but leaving it out could create ambiguity. Forest Service and USDA preference is for it to be used.

The vendor had red, green, orange, and purple balloons for sale.

The hikers remembered to bring food, water, sunblock, bug spray, flashlights, a radio with extra batteries, and even a first aid kit with bandages. Unfortunately, they proved not to have brought any sense of direction, attentiveness, wilderness savvy, patience, or cool-headedness when faced with the unexpected.

Note that without the final commas, the reader's sense of where the list ends (or which items in the list are meant to be regarded as a single item) could be impeded.

2. Commas in dates.

When the date is written month, day, year, a comma follows the day (not the month):

November 21, 2012

General preference is to use a comma after the year, as well:

Thank you for your letter of November 21, 2012, regarding....

No comma is used if the day and month are inverted:

21 November 2012

No comma is used if there is only a month and a year:

November 2012

If the day of week is included, a comma follows that as well:

Tuesday, November 21, 2012

3. Commas and independent clauses. Use a comma before the coordinating conjunction (such as: “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” “for,” “yet,” “so”) that joins two independent clauses. (An independent clause is one that could stand alone as a complete sentence.)

Horses eat oats, *but* little lambs eat ivy.

The decision was made very quickly, *and* the public seemed to be in agreement, *but* a number of problems soon emerged.

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Remember that an independent clause, in order to stand as a complete sentence, must have a subject and a verb, and it must express a complete thought. Do not use a comma before a conjunction if there is not a complete sentence on each side of the conjunction.

Sadie and Bob like holidays and parties.

Sharon and Cindy love their jobs but would prefer shorter hours.

“Sharon and Cindy love their jobs” is a complete sentence in the second example, but “would prefer shorter hours” does not have a subject (such as “*they* would prefer shorter hours”) and is therefore not a complete sentence).

4. Commas and dependent clauses. A dependent clause *depends* on the rest of the sentence for completion. If the dependent clause comes first in the sentence, use a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence (that is, from the *independent* clause, the part that could stand alone as a separate sentence).

When Sadie gets too old to dream, she'll stay up all night and drink coffee.

Until the risk of avalanche has subsided, no hikers will be allowed in the area.

No comma is needed if the dependent clause follows the independent clause in the sentence.

Sadie will stay up all night and drink coffee when she gets too old to dream.

No hikers will be allowed in the area until the risk of avalanche has subsided.

5. Commas and parenthetical phrases. Use commas to set off any “interrupting words or phrases” in a sentence. These are words that could be removed without rendering the sentence ungrammatical. (This is a general rule, some more specific applications of which follow in the next few rules.)

Randy, *lacking any good excuse to get out of it*, had to shovel the snow. Then he headed for the electric blanket, *draped over one end of the couch*, and curled up under it. He might, *if he is very lucky*, get his feet thawed out enough to squeeze them into his favorite black cowboy boots, and then, *even if his lips are still blue and his teeth are still chattering*, he'll be heading for the dance tonight.

Each of the parenthetical phrases could be removed and the sentences would still be grammatical: “Randy had to shovel the snow. Then he headed for the electric blanket and curled up under it.” And so forth.

Go see if that book, *the one we were talking about*, is still on the table.

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6. Commas and participial phrases. Use a comma after a participial phrase that begins a sentence. A participle is a form of a verb that can also function as an adjective, describing a noun. When used at the beginning of a sentence, a participial phrase describes the subject of the sentence that follows.

Chased by the wild boar, Drew ran as fast as he could to the nearest tree.

Lacking any further instructions, Rich went ahead with the tree removal.

7. Commas and appositives. Use commas to set off an appositive. An appositive is a word or phrase that renames someone or something already named.

Ranger Rick, *the only employee present*, was forced to make a decision.

(Ranger Rick = the only employee present)

The lucky winners, *Kim and Linda*, embarked on their trip with great excitement.

(The lucky winners = Kim and Linda)

If the appositive comes at the end of the sentence, just one comma is needed. The period removes the need for the second comma.

Lucy has always wanted to visit Alaska, *one of the most beautiful places in the world*.

(Alaska = one of the most beautiful places in the world)

8. Commas and adjectives. Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives that describe the same noun *if there is no conjunction* (“and,” “but,” and so forth) *used to join them*. (If there are three or more adjectives, with a final conjunction, so that they function as a list, follow rule 1.)

The short, bald, awkward stranger stepped on Robert’s sore, aching feet.

“Short,” “bald,” and “awkward” all describe the stranger; “sore” and “aching” describe the feet.

The small, bright red, cuddly shawl was exactly what Noreen wanted.

Notice that “bright” describes “red,” not “shawl.” Be careful to separate just the adjectives that describe the noun. “Small,” “red,” and “cuddly” describe the shawl.

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9. Commas and sentence beginnings. Commas are generally used to set off short words and phrases, such as: yes, no, well, oh, nevertheless, therefore, after all, finally, and in conclusion, when they appear at the beginning of a sentence.

After all, Janet, Kathy, and Tanya are the real dispatch experts in Missoula.

Yes, Jerry says he will continue to be supportive of our efforts.

10. Commas and other pauses. If necessary, commas should be used to separate words that might confuse the reader if the words were read together.

To you, snakes and skunks may be lovely animals, but to me, they are frightening.

Note that the first and third commas aren't strictly, grammatically necessary (while the second one is, since it separates two independent clauses), but without those commas the phrases could be harder to parse.