Maxim: A comma = an intonational pause.

Corollary: The best way to test a comma is to read the sentence aloud as you intend it to be understood.

1 Fronted modifiers

Place a comma before a fronted modifier.

(1) On Monday, the papers are due.

(2) When we got in sight of the liberal radical library protestors hurled rocks at us.
   a. When we got in sight of the liberal, radical library protestors hurled rocks at us.
   b. When we got in sight of the liberal radical, library protestors hurled rocks at us.
   c. When we got in sight of the liberal radical library, protestors hurled rocks at us.

2 Before and

Place a comma before and in a series of three or more conjuncts. It can make a difference:

(3) I enjoy cookies, peanut butter and honey and cabbage.

(4) I enjoy cookies, peanut butter, and honey and cabbage.

(5) I enjoy cookies, peanut butter and honey, and cabbage.

3 Between sentences

Place a comma between two sentences conjoined by and, but, so, then, and probably others.

(6) Al rode up Empire Grade, and he got arrested snooping around Lockheed-Martin.

(7) Al rode up Empire Grade and got arrested snooping around Lockheed-Martin.
   (comma-free verb-phrase coordination)
4 Appositives

Place a comma before and after all appositive expressions.

(8) Sue, whom we rarely see, is coming for dinner tonight.

(9) They interviewed Charlie, a psychopath, about the babysitting position.

(10) Ames is, as the FBI said, a spy.

Don’t be fooled by the similarities between (8) and (11), which should have no commas around its relative clause (who we rarely see).

(11) Some people who we rarely see are coming for dinner tonight.

4.1 Exception to rule 4

Some appositive-like expressions don’t take commas:

(12) President Bush visited Texas.

(13) The cyclist Lance Armstrong is training right now.

Bottom line Read the sentence aloud. If you want your reader to hear pauses, to isolate the appositive expression, then use commas (or parentheses — even dashes will do).

5 Exception: Obligatory commas you can’t hear

Complex place names and dates are broken up with commas.

(14) I visited Juneau, Alaska.

(15) I returned home on June 12, 2007.


6 Exception: No comma despite a possible pause

Never put a comma right after a subject.

(17) The fact that the pig you have been feeding birdseed can fly is not impressive to me.

6.1 Exception to exception 6

If your subject contains an appositive expression, then that appositive expression must be followed by a comma, by rule 4.

(18) The fact that the pig you have been feeding birdseed can fly, which Ed finds amazing, is not impressive to me.