“When I looked in my handbook, I found 60 different rules for commas. How am I ever going to learn to use them correctly!?” Sound familiar? Students do feel unsure about comma usage. Why? Because the comma is the most-used punctuation mark in English. In fact, it’s used more often than all other punctuation marks combined. You see commas so often while reading that your eye and brain become desensitized. To master comma rules, you must figure out why a comma is being used. Sometimes even an instructor’s marks on an essay don’t help. If you’ve used too many commas this time, on the next paper you might not use any—and vice versa. Many of those 60-odd comma rules boil down to this:

Commas are used most frequently for
introducers
interrupters
add-ons

Check your own writing for these three uses, and you’ll begin to master commas.

INTRODUCERS (interjections, phrases, clauses, adverbs, infinitives, etc.)

Well, I guess it’s time to start my English paper.

Because it’s 3:00 a.m. Monday, I should start my English paper.

Most of the time, I start my English paper the morning it’s due.

INTERRUPTERS (phrases, clauses, infinitives, etc.)

My composition instructor, knowing my habit of procrastinating, reminded me to start early on my essay.

Most student writers, even good ones who get decent grades on their essays, feel unsure about their ability.

Good writing, I believe, happens because the writer has something important to share with the reader.

ADD-ONS (phrases, infinitives, clauses, participles, etc.)

Students whose essays are late blame lack of time, no matter what excuses they’ve used before.

It’s hard for me to write an introductory paragraph, slowing down my writing process.

I’ve never enjoyed writing, to tell you the truth.