Commas with Parenthetical Phrases and Clauses, Coordinating Conjunctions, and Introductory Phrases

What is the difference between a phrase and a clause?

A clause has a subject and a verb. It can be a complete sentence or part of a complete sentence. If a clause forms a complete thought—that is, if it has a subject and a verb that may stand on their own as a complete sentence—it is called an independent clause. (Ex. It looked like it would rain.) If a clause has both a subject and a verb but forms an incomplete thought, it is called a dependent clause. (Ex. Because the clouds became very dark,.) Here is a complete sentence made up of two clauses: Because the clouds became very dark, it looked like it would rain.

A phrase is a cluster of two or more words that do not form a complete thought. Usually phrases are either a subject with no verb or a verb with no subject—but not always. (Ex. While reaching for her umbrella,) (Ex. the purple one,) (Ex. Not yet.).

What is the difference between dependent and independent phrases/clauses?

A clause has a subject and a verb and could be a complete sentence or is part of a complete sentence. An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. Independent clauses have both subjects and predicates; the subject is a person, place, thing, or idea, and the predicate answers the question, “What about that subject?” An independent clause could stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses are parts of sentences that need more information to be complete. They have a subject and a verb but no predicate; dependent clauses are not complete sentence. Ex. I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure spring break begins on the 15th. In this example, “but I’m pretty sure spring break begins on the 15th” is the dependent clause. It depends on the other part of the sentence (the independent clause “I could be wrong”) to make sense and be complete. Phrases are always dependent because they could not stand alone as a sentence.

Some words that might be used to create dependent phrases or clauses include but, because, so until, although, and since. Ex. “Since it looks like it might rain” is a dependent clause because it is not complete without more information. It depends on more to become a finished thought. Complete: I’d better bring my umbrella, since it looks like it might rain. “I’d better bring my umbrella” is an independent clause and “since it looks like it might rain” is a dependent clause. Since it looks like it might rain, possibly even pour, I better bring my umbrella. “Since it looks like it might rain” is a dependent clause, “possibly even pour” is a phrase, and “I better bring my umbrella” is an independent clause.
Commas with introductory phrases or words
Introductory phrases or words are dependent parts of a sentence that “set the stage” for the independent clause (complete idea or sentence) following it. Use commas to set off the introductions. The bolded words below indicate introductory words or phrases.

Ex. Before I went to college, I used to sleep until 9 a.m. Ex. In order to make it to the bus, we need to leave immediately. Ex. After it had rained for three days straight, we decided to cut short our camping trip. Ex. Whether you are right or wrong, I still love you. Ex. Mostly, the group gets along very well. Ex. Oddly, my keys are still missing. Typically, my cat does not snore like that. In the 1990s, the policy changed.

Commas with parenthetical phrases or clauses
A parenthetical phrase or clause is like a side comment, a part of a sentence that adds information but is not essential for making the sentence complete. Parenthetical phrases or clauses are set off by commas. Ex.: The play at Concordia University, where I am a student, was exceptionally funny. One could remove the phrase “where I am a student” and the sentence would be complete; the essential meaning would not altered. If you can add the words “by the way” to the phrase, chances are it is parenthetical. Ex. My blue socks, which (by the way) need mending, are still in the laundry pile.

The classic example below demonstrates the difference between comma use with a restrictive (essential) clause or phrase and a nonrestrictive (parenthetical, non-essential) clause or phrase.

- The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage.
  (Restrictive: Indicates a specific lawn mower among more than one)
- The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage.
  (Nonrestrictive: Adds non-essential information about the only lawn mower)

Commas with coordinating conjunctions
A conjunction is a part of speech that connects words, phrases, or clauses. A coordinating conjunction connects two words, phrases, or clauses of equal importance or having the same grammatical structure within a sentence. There are six common coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. The mnemonic (memory aid) for those conjunctions is FANBOYS. Coordinating conjunctions are preceded by a comma when they connect two independent clauses (each clause could stand alone as a sentence).

Ex.: I left early for once, for someone else cleaned up the kitchen. Ex.: I am going to see you tomorrow, and I can hardly wait. Ex.: The research did not support her hypothesis, nor did it include any reliable sources (the independent clause would be “It did not include any reliable sources). Ex.: I should really go, but I just can’t leave until this song is over. Ex.: I should leave now, or I should leave first thing tomorrow morning. Ex.: Professor Pritz is retiring, yet he said he will continue to teach now and again as an adjunct professor. Ex.: My sister will take me to the airport, so you no longer need to fill up your gas tank.