

So vs. so that

Another common mistake I see in students' papers is the misuse of the word "so" in place of the phrase "so that." It's the context in which it is used that determines whether to use one or the other.

The word "so" is one of the coordinating conjunctions that we use along with a comma to join two independent clauses to form a compound sentence, as in the following: It started to rain, so we went inside. When used in a compound sentence, "so" introduces the result or that which logically follows the idea expressed by the first independent clause: It started to rain, **so** we went inside. The second clause is the *result* of the first.

However, if the second clause is the *reason* for the first, we use "so that" to introduce the second clause. Here's an example: We went inside so that we wouldn't get soaked. In this case, the portion of the sentence that follows "so that" is the reason for the first part of the sentence and answers the question, "Why?" We went inside... Why? ...so that we wouldn't get soaked.

Our first example—it started to rain, so we went inside—is, as we said earlier, a compound sentence, so we need a comma before our conjunction "so." Our second example is *not* a compound sentence because the clause that follows "so"—that we wouldn't get soaked—is not an independent clause; that is, it can't stand alone as a complete sentence. Therefore, there's no comma before the word "so." Also, in this case, the second portion of our sentence does *not* answer the question, "Why?" It started to rain. Why? Who knows? A storm front may have been moving in.

So in conclusion, if the second clause of a compound sentence is the *result* of the first clause, use only the word "so" preceded by a comma. But if the second part of the sentence is the *reason* for the first part, use the phrase "so that" without a comma.