Punctuating Complete Thoughts

What happens when one complete thought ends and another begins?

To answer that question, let's first define what a complete thought is in written academic English.

**SUBJECT + VERB (OBJECT OPTIONAL)**

You have three basic options:

- **the period** .
- **the semicolon** ;
- **the comma with a coordinating conjunction** , for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so or **fanboys**

How do you know which one to choose?

Use these simple guidelines to make your choice.

A *period* indicates to the reader that a new thought has ended and a new one is beginning. There's no implied relationship between the two complete thoughts. In the reader's mind, there is a noticeable beginning and ending requiring a pause.

I like cats. I like dogs.

A *semicolon* indicates to the reader that the thoughts are somehow related; the relationship may or may not be obvious. In the reader's mind, there is a noticeable relationship between the two thoughts that may require a brief pause to decode.

I like cats; I like dogs.
I like cats; however, I also like dogs.

*Note that a comma is required after the transition word.
Those transition words allow the reader to predict the relationship between the two ideas.

A *comma followed by a coordinating conjunction* indicates to the reader that the thoughts are directly related, and the relationship, in the reader's mind, requires little pause to decode.

I like cats, for I like dogs.
I like cats, and I like dogs.
I don't like cats, nor do I like dogs.
I like cats, but I also like dogs.
I like cats, or I like dogs.
I like cats, yet I like dogs.
I like cats, so I like dogs.