Grammar and Punctuation: Commas

#1 Use commas to separate out items in a series of three or more.

Example   Dalton and Fool (2010) sought to analyze the effects of sucralose, saccharin, and aspartame.

Explanation   *The commas help to ensure clarity in the list.*

#2 Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to separate two independent clauses (complete sentences).

Example   Johnson et al. (2013) evaluated the BMI of study participants monthly, and the researchers noted a 1.6% increase in BMI over the length of the study (p. 235).

Explanation   *The comma and the conjunction indicate to the reader that a complete sentence has ended and another will follow.*

#3 Use a comma to set off a subordinate clause (dependent clause) at the beginning of a sentence. Subordinate clauses begin with words like when, since, if, because, although, even, etc.

Example   When researchers studied various artificial sweeteners, they found that only three raised insulin significantly (Smith, 2014).

Explanation   *The clause needs to be separated to make the beginning of the independent clause (complete sentence) clear.*

#4 Use a comma to set off an introductory element (phrase) like infinitive phrases and prepositional phrases.

Examples   To understand how artificial sweeteners function in humans, Johnson et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study over the course of five years.

In the study, researchers found that artificial sweeteners affected several metabolic processes (Johnson et al., 2013).

Explanation   *These are phrases that introduce the independent clause, but they are not essential to the meaning.*

#5 Use a comma to set off a parenthetical element in a complete sentence.

Examples   The studies, however, illustrated several health risks associated with artificial sweeteners (Dalton & Fool, 2010).

Johnson et al. (2013) concluded that artificial sweeteners, such as those found in diet sodas, spiked insulin.

Explanation   *These are elements that can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning. They often make the sentence better, but the main clause works without them.*

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