QUICK GUIDE TO COMMAS

Commascanbedifficulttounderstand,especiallywhenthere’s sosmanyrules to remember. These are not strict
guidelines, so it’s important to consider the purpose, audience, and effect when choosing to omit or include a
comma. This guide explains some common uses of commas that follow academic conventions in the United States.

1. FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So
   ○ When using a comma with one of the FANBOYS, the comma is put beforehand, at the end of the clause.
     ■ Ex: “I want to make an appointment at the Writing Center, but I’m so busy!”

2. Lists
   ○ Commas are used to break up a list of three or more words, phrases, or clauses listed in a series. The last comma
     in the list is referred to as the Oxford Comma and is optional depending on the context of the sentence.
     ■ Ex: “In my appointment, we discussed my introduction, my thesis, and my conclusion.”

3. Separating Parenthetical Phrases
   ○ A parenthetical phrase is a phrase that is inserted into a sentence using commas or dashes. If taken out, the
     meaning and structure of the original sentence remains.
     ■ Ex: “My consultant, a senior here at SU, was very helpful!”
   ○ In the example provided, the phrase “a senior here at SU” can be taken out and the structure of the sentence is
     still intact, so it needs two commas to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

4. Separating Clauses
   ○ A sentence is made up of independent and dependent clauses, and these are separated using commas. (An
     independent clause is a complete sentence, whereas a dependent clause is a sentence fragment and cannot
     stand on its own.) This can help with sentence clarity.
     ■ Ex: “To get help with my essay, I made an appointment at the Writing Center.”
   ○ “To get help with my essay” is a dependent clause while “I made an appointment at the Writing Center” is an
     independent clause, so they need to be separated by a comma. This use can also be applied to sentences made
     up of two independent clauses.

5. Between Adjectives
   ○ A comma is used between coordinate adjectives, or two adjectives that describe the same noun. To figure out if
     two adjectives are coordinate, the comma can be replaced with “and.”
     ■ Ex: “My professor advised against long, complicated sentences.”
   ○ In the example, both adjectives describe “sentences,” and thus need a comma to separate them.

6. Quotations
   ○ Commas are great for introducing embedded quotes and can help highlight the quote in a sentence. They are
     often optional and their use is up to the writer.
     ■ Ex: “The author stated, ‘I love the Writing Center!’”

7. Sentence Modifiers
   ○ While commas may seem confusing, they can generally be used anywhere, including at the natural pauses in a
     sentence to signify a shift or to clarify the meaning of a sentence and prevent misreading. In the previous
     sentence, a comma was used before “including.” In this case, the comma indicates a shift in the sentence.

References:
“Commas: Quick Rules.” Purdue Online Writing Lab. Retrieved from
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/index.html