Disruptive Commas

The comma is a useful guide for readers. It tells readers when to pause, and it can clarify the meaning of a sentence. For example, the sentence “Later, survival past infancy became the norm.” is ambiguous without the comma. However, commas in the wrong place are disruptive because they break the flow of ideas. The sentences below contain disruptive commas which have been placed in parentheses for emphasis.

Do not use a comma:

- between a subject and its verb.

  All of the habitable parts of the earth(,) were believed to be parts of a single land mass, Orbis Terrarum.

  Profound differences in early training(,) crucially affect the entire society involved.

- between a verb and its object.

  The second crucial point was(,) the United States’ insistence on inspections to ensure compliance of the disarmament pact.

  The Affirmative Action policy required(,) submission of hiring procedures which were non-discriminatory.

- between two words, phrases, or dependent (subordinate) clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, for, nor, so, yet).

  verbs  Society must reassign the “pseudo-biological” role of child rearing(,) and establish it as an acceptable role for men.

  In art, the thing which we cannot measure(,) or use for comparison is what we call “style.”

  nouns  As a result of a fluctuating economy, more and more women(,) and men are entering the work force.

  clauses  To understand what Columbus’ problem was(,) and why he sought refuge in his Terrestrial Paradise, we must remind ourselves of the Ptolemaic-Christian view of the lands of the earth.

  prepositions  Therefore, it is important to assess objectively the process for modifying patterns of genes(,) of a human being(,) by various means.
• After the last item in a series.

The role of women in a given culture, political system, or social milieu is often pictured succinctly in a description of the work they do.

The examples of Annapolis, Williamsburg, Savannah, Washington, and many other nineteenth-century planned state capital cities remind us that public initiative and investment in city planning once created an urban environment superior in quality to that of the present.

• Between an adjective or adverb and the word it modifies.

  adverb/adjective Efron has an interesting chapter on the current fear of extremely low doses of carcinogens and the question of safety thresholds.

  In less than fifty years, it will be possible to set up elaborately constructed rock boxes with large rock-storage capacities.

  adjective/noun It is a complicated, little-understood process that works well.

  The exciting, action-packed movie has received overwhelming, critical, acclaim.

  adverb/verb If gestural language were necessary for chimpanzee survival, it would be transmitted culturally through the generations.

  The committee planned the new marketing campaign weekly, monthly, and bimonthly.

• before or after a phrase or clause in the middle of a sentence when it restricts the meaning of the sentence.

  The types of cancer which respond to chemotherapy are generally among the least common forms of the disease.

  The effects of therapy resulting from radiation are still only vaguely understood.

• before a dependent (subordinate) clause when it comes after the main clause.

  Americans themselves are profoundly discouraged by the handguns that seem to breed uncontrollably among them like roaches.

  The four-color brochure was replaced by a black and white brochure because of budget restrictions.

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