Comma Rules

Here are five of the most common comma rules (developed by Deborah Rivers for Central Piedmont Community College).

1. To separate independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs. (An independent clause has a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought.)
   
   She can swim fast, but she cannot swim far.
   
   It was pouring outside; therefore, the game was cancelled.

2. To separate introductory words or phrases OR subordinate clauses from the main clause. (A subordinate clause begins with a subordinating conjunction.)
   
   Unafraid, she jogged through the dark tunnel.
   
   Since they first met in college, Jack and Lisa have dated only each other.

3. To set apart words or phrases that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence.
   
   The team with the best record, of course, is favored to win the tournament.
   
   Lemon pie, for example, is on the dessert list today.

4. To set apart words or phrases that rename or extend the meaning of a nearby noun.
   
   His doctor, who studied at Johns Hopkins, is only twenty-four years old.
   
   Mr. Martin, the school principal, retired last year.

5. To separate words, phrases or clauses in a series.
   
   They made lasagna, garlic bread, and chocolate pie.
   
   Benny had $14, Rose had $12, and Sal had $8 to spend at the carnival.

PRACTICE: Add the missing comma(s) and identify the rule.

1. My best friend Jason grew up in Vermont. (Rule: ________)

2. He wanted to take a nap but he knew he had to study for an exam instead. (Rule: ________)

3. Yesterday Sherri drove to school to the grocery store and to her mom's house. (Rule: ________)

4. I really like candy so will you please share your chocolates with me? (Rule: ________)

5. When I try to remember all these comma rules I get a headache. (Rule: ________)

6. Commas are however very important. (Rule: ________)

7. Professor Peterson a professor here at HACC won an award last week. (Rule: ________)

8. Conclusions on the other hand should summarize instead of introduce. (Rule: ________)

9. We'll do these exercises and then we'll review them. (Rule: ________)

10. She dropped her books and jumped in the air surprised. (Rule: ________)

11. I am a student and I'm also a peer tutor. (Rule: ________)

12. I do not like writing essays however I do like writing poetry. (Rule: ________)

Handout adapted from Central Piedmont Community College's Academic Learning Center Grammar Handout titled “Comma Uses” developed by Deborah Rivers.

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