Commas, Part 2: Do Not Use Commas Loosely

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It is thought the comma originated in ancient Byzantium when hemlock and mandrake were popular poisons. The comma was first used as a visual mark to help modulate time and breathing for reading out loud. Although less powerful than a sentence-ending period or exclamation mark, the comma has survived and now performs more duties than any other form of punctuation. Unfortunately, so many duties leads some writers to use commas too loosely.

1. Do not use a comma between a subject and its predicate in a sentence.

Incorrect: Solely the dose, differentiates a poison from a remedy.

In this example the subject is “dose” and the predicate is “differentiates”—there is no need to introduce a pause and physically separate one from the other.

Correct: Solely the dose differentiates a poison from a remedy.

2. Do not use a comma before a conjunction (“and,” “but,” “or”) when linking a pair of related words or phrases.

Incorrect: Jack and Jill went to the apothecary, and purchased some cyanide.

Since “went” and “purchased” are related predicates for the same subject (“Jack and Jill”), the writer should not loosely place a comma here.

Correct: Jack and Jill went to the apothecary and purchased some cyanide.

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