Parentheses Tip Sheet

Parentheses are used to signal a number of things within a sentence, including:

- Additional information, including translations or pronunciation guides.
- Minor digressions and brief commentary.
- Explanations of acronyms and abbreviations. Ex: “CWAC (the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum) is closed on Fridays, but open on Sundays.” Note that using parentheses for the reverse is also completely acceptable. Ex: “The Center for Writing Across the Curriculum (CWAC) is closed on Fridays, but open on Sundays.”
- Numbering items on a list. Ex: “The necessary ingredients are (1) the thing, (2) the other thing, and (3) the third thing.”
- In-text citations for many formats, including MLA and APA.

When using parenthetical statements within sentences (including citations), remember:

- **Do not** place commas before parentheses.
- **Do not** place commas after parentheses unless the sentence would still need it anyway, even without the parenthetical remark.
- Periods always go outside the parentheses. Question marks and exclamation points can, however, be placed within parentheses if the parenthetical statement is a full, stand-alone sentence.

Note that parentheses can be used to enclose full sentences. In such cases, punctuation of any kind belongs within the parentheses.

A common mistake when it comes to the use of parentheses is incorrect placement, particularly mistaking information that is important to the sentence overall for a supplemental statement.

Here is an example of unnecessary parentheses:

- “Researchers have said that 13 million (estimates run as high as 18 million) Americans have diabetes.”

A corrected version of the sentence may read as follows:

- “Researchers have said that 13 to 18 million Americans have diabetes.”

Since, in this instance, introducing both numbers is important to the sentence as a whole, parentheses are unnecessary.

If you are ever concerned about whether or not you have used parentheses correctly within a sentence, an easy tip is to consider the importance of the information they enclose. If the additional information is vital to your sentence, then parentheses are likely unnecessary. If that information only has tangential meaning, then parentheses are appropriate.