“Parenthetical Commas”

Sometimes what commas are doing is setting off parts of a sentence that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence but that simply provide additional information. These kinds of commas interrupt a thought to add other information. They are often called “parenthetical commas” because parentheses can do the same job, a fact that can be useful to keep in mind. By the way, dashes can also do this. These all work:

*The Fugitive,* a popular television show back in the 1960s, was made into a movie starring Harrison Ford.

*The Fugitive*—a popular television show back in the 1960s—was made into a movie starring Harrison Ford.

*The Fugitive* (a popular television show back in the 1960s) was made into a movie starring Harrison Ford.

If you recognize these as essentially the same and are aware of why you are using them, you can avoid the common error of leaving one of the pair (usually a comma) out. As in math, something that is opened by a parenthesis must also be closed by a parenthesis; this is true even when the "parenthesis" is a comma or a dash. (Also note that the opening and closing punctuation should match.)

For more on setting things off with commas, see *Rules for Writers* (7th ed.) 298-304; for the dash, 335-36; parentheses, 336-37. Pages in 8th ed. are 299-307; 332-33; 333.

**Brackets** are similar to parentheses but are used only in two special cases:

- Use brackets when you would otherwise have parentheses within parentheses.
- Use brackets to indicate changes and additions inside a quotation.

(See *Rules for Writers* 7th ed. 337 or 8th ed. 334 for brackets.)

**Deciding which to use:**

Although the effect of each of these three options varies somewhat from reader to reader, many readers find that dashes give the greatest impact to the parenthetical material and parentheses the least, with commas in the middle.

Both dashes and parentheses have the advantage of being obviously different from any other commas you may have in a sentence, and so are a good choice if there are other commas in the vicinity.
Fix these errors:

1. The California Penal Code added an amendment, Section 598b stating the eating of animals traditionally kept as pets was illegal.

2. The Women’s Sports Foundation Executive Director, Donna Lopiano stated that . . .

3. He omits however, that the only reason that the news on the New York Times Online is free of charge is because of the marketing firms buying the information.

4. This statement draws on two of the largest denominations in the world, Catholics and Muslims to identify with this act and feel their privacy is invaded.

5. Providing a quote early in the essay from Martha Burk, a strong representative of the feminists’ group is a great way to pave the road for the rest of the essay.

6. The essay "Point: Internet Marketing Threatens Consumer Privacy," by Russ Cobb claims that internet marketing using zip codes will lull everyone into conformity.

7. She also mentions the movements in the past—the "living will" law and the Supreme Court ruling that gave all Americans the right to refuse medical treatment, and uses the past as an example.