Believe it or not, comma usage in standard written English can be reduced to about five rules. While the list below is not exhaustive, it covers the most common uses of commas.

1. **Use a comma after an introductory words, phrases, and clauses.**
   - At this time, there are no more zombies in South Dakota.
   - For example, cardio is essential to escape the horde.
   - In the event of an emergency, common kitchen items create quite the weapon arsenal.
   - If I had known that the apocalypse was coming, I would have stocked more supplies.

2. **Use a comma to separate items in a series.**
   - I would like you to get shotgun shells, Twinkies, and a banjo at the store.
   - A number of factors increase a person’s risk of becoming a zombie including poor diet, living in a high density population, and hesitation.

   *Note: MLA style requires a comma between the final two elements in a series, but many other style guides do not. When in doubt, ask your instructor which style she prefers.*

3. **Use a comma to separate clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) in compound sentences.**
   - The zombie virus may have started in Washington D.C., but it is rapidly spreading.
   - The public began to panic, and the military had to be called in to help restore order.

4. **Use a comma to separate non-essential clauses and appositives.**
   Some sentences contain clauses that are not necessary to the sentence’s meaning. In other words, the information in these clauses is extra, but does clarify or add to the sentence.
   - Agent Zero, a Secret Service agent, was the first to be infected.
   - The only safe spot in Spearfish is at the amusement park, Black Hills Playland.
   - The zombie, who hadn’t yet seen us, suddenly ran toward us when Ray coughed.
   - Dr. Sandra Black, who works at the Food and Drug Administration, was misinformed when she reported that the zombie outbreak was a rumor.

   Notice that each of the phrases separated by commas in the examples above can be removed without affecting the meaning of the sentence. In the sentence below, all information is crucial to the meaning, and therefore should not be punctuated with commas.
   - The students who ate nachos that fateful day were the first to change.

5. **Commas are also commonly used in the following applications:**
   *To set off parenthetical, transitional, and contrasting elements in a sentence.*
• It was my car, not hers, which we worked on to add armor and flamethrowers.
• Randy’s father, as a matter of fact, was able to supply the necessary parts.

To set off dates, addresses, and numbers.
• The outbreak began on Friday, July 13, 2007.
• You can send payment for the weapons to 765 Jackson Lane, Rockmore, Illinois, 44589.

To set off quotations.
• “It’s now or never,” Marcia shouted before bursting through the door.
• Most of us should live by the expression, “Enjoy the little things.”

Watch out for these common misuses of commas:
Comma splice, or two complete sentences joined with a comma.
• It was one of the worst days of my life, my sisters and brothers didn’t all make it home from the mall.
  ○ Correct: It was one of the worst days of my life. My sisters and brothers didn’t all make it home from the mall.

Two complete sentences can be separated with a period, joined with a semicolon, or joined using a comma and a coordinating conjunction.

Unnecessary comma in compound elements.
• Only the traveler’s briefcase, and wallet, remained after she was swarmed at the airport.
  ○ Correct: Only the traveler’s briefcase and wallet remained after she was swarmed at the airport.
• José worked as a chef, and taught high school, before resorting to life as a zombie.
  ○ Correct: José worked as a chef and taught high school before resorting to life as a zombie.

The sentences above use compound subjects or compound predicates. Although these elements use a coordinating conjunction, they do not require a comma.

Unnecessary comma before the first or after the last item in a series.
• I would like you to get, shotgun shells, Twinkies, and a banjo at the store.
  ○ Correct: I would like you to get shotgun shells, Twinkies, and a banjo at the store.
• They used shotguns, swords, pistols, hammers, and spears, to keep the horde at bay.
  ○ Correct: They used shotguns, swords, pistols, hammers, and spears to keep the horde at bay.