

That'll do, Comma

More than any punctuation mark, the comma draws our attention to the mixed origins of modern punctuation. The comma has two distinct functions:

1. To illuminate the grammar of a sentence.
2. To point up—rather in the manner of musical notation—such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow.

Punctuation developed slowly and cautiously. Pause in the wrong place and the sense of a religious text can alter in significant ways. Compare the following:

“Verily, I say unto thee, This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

“Verily I say unto thee this day, Thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

If you do not already picture yourself resorting to threats over the “correct way to punctuate using commas,” by the time you have read the following rules on commas, I hope you will.

The comma, the “sheepdog” of punctuation, performs the following functions:

1. Separating items in a list:

Commas divide items in a list, but are not required before the “and” on the end (this last comma is referred to as the **Oxford** or **serial** comma. More on that in a minute).

If it can be replaced by the word “and” or “or,” the comma is correct.

The flag is red, white and blue.

In this case, the items in the list are clear, and no confusion about combination or collaboration can occur because of the “and.”

1a. However, many people (including yours truly) favor the **Oxford** (or **serial**) comma. These people place a comma before the last “and” in a series.

I like bacon, eggs, orange juice and toast.

versus

I like bacon, eggs, orange juice, and toast.

This is a debate among grammarians. Join the fray! Pick a side! End soggy toast!

1b. In a list of adjectives, again, the rule is that you use a comma where an “and” would be appropriate — where the modifying words are all modifying the same thing to the same degree.

It was a dark, stormy night.

versus

It was a dark and stormy night.

You do not use a comma for the following. Here, the adjectives are not intended as a list.

It was an endangered white rhino.

The Grand Old Duke of York had ten thousand men.

2. Joining sentences:

Commas are used when two complete sentences are joined together, using such conjunctions as **and, or, but, while, and yet:**

The boys wanted to stay up until midnight, but they grew tired and fell asleep.

3. Filling gaps

Missing words are implied by a comma.

Annie had dark hair; Sally, fair.

4. Setting off direct speech

The Queen said, “Doesn’t anyone know it’s my birthday?”

5. Setting off interjections

Blimey, what would we do without it? Stop, or I’ll scream.

6. Commas that come in pairs

To decide whether or not a pair of commas is needed, you need to determine whether the bit between the commas is “defining,” or restrictive, or not.

If the clause is “defining,” you don’t need to present it with a pair of commas. Thus:

The Highland Terriers that live in our street aren’t cute at all.

If the information in the clause is “non-defining,” however, then you do:

The Highland Terriers, when they are barking, are a nightmare.

When the interruption to the sentence comes at the beginning or at the end, the grammatical rule of commas-in-pairs still applies, even if you can only see one of the commas.

Of course, there weren’t enough tickets to go round.

That sentence is, from the grammatical point of view, the same as:

There weren’t, of course, enough tickets to go round

Common Comma Pitfalls

Avoid the following:

1. The “yob’s comma.” “The yob’s comma has no syntactical value: it is the equivalent of a fuddled gasp for breath, as the poor writer marshals his battered thoughts.”

The society decided not to prosecute the owners of the Windsor Safari Park, where animals, have allegedly been fed live to snakes and lions, on legal advice.

2. Avoid American telegraphese in news headlines, where the comma is increasingly given the job of replacing the word “and.” Thus:

UK study spurns al-Qaeda, Iraq link

Exercises to Bring Out Your Inner Stickler

1) Punctuate the following paragraph taken from *The New Yorker*.

Not long ago in Paris I met a young Muslim woman named Djamila Benrehab who at the age of twenty had donned not only a black head scarf but a billowy black abaya and under it all a tight black bandanna to her eyebrows that left only the circle of her face exposed. Djamila is a big apple cheeked endearing person. She speaks a beautiful lilting French and is intelligent and quite charming. Her dream is to leave Paris and go to Brooklyn where she has heard Muslim girls go veiled and nobody minds and in any case “It can’t be worse than here.”

2) Punctuate the following sentences.

- a) Leonora walked on her head, a little higher than usual.
- b) The driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank and swam to the riverbank.
- c) Don’t guess use a timer or a watch.
- d) The convict said the judge is mad.

3) Read through your draft, and mark / delete commas as needed. Pay attention to how the meaning of each sentence is significantly altered by the placement of the comma.