

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 8: The Comma

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The basic fact

The basic fact about the contemporary English comma is that it can mark only a syntactic juncture of a sentence, but it does not have to mark all syntactic junctures. There are some that must be marked, and some that can but need not be marked. This Chapter will discuss the necessary, unnecessary and the wrong uses of the comma.

The necessary comma

The comma has to mark only five syntactic junctures:

- the junctures in a list of single nouns and in a list of noun, adjective and adverb phrases;
- the juncture of a present-participle phrase and the basic sentence;
- the juncture of the relative noun phrase and the noun to which it relates;
- the junctures of the composite sentence;
- the junctures of single-word adjectives that describe independently.

The necessary comma in a list

The points between the items of a list must be marked by commas. A list consists of:

- consecutive nouns and noun phrases;
- consecutive adjective phrases;
- consecutive adverb-led phrases.

Nouns as a list

Nouns (underlined) name single items in these sentences. Commas demarcate them. But the conjunctive 'and' takes the place of the comma between the last two items of a list. (Only American English precedes this 'and' with a comma.):

After the meeting all the chairs, tables, pens and paper they borrowed were returned.

Love, tolerance and charity abound in our society.

Alternate nouns as a list

The subject raised by the basic sentence of the next sentence is named by the proper noun *Dr Allen Aitken*, and by the noun phrase

the director of the local branch of the International Society of Hypnosis. Two noun sequences that name the same subject constitute a list. Like any item of a list, alternate names must be separated by a comma. A second comma marks the end of the sequence that is the alternate name.

Dr Allen Aitken, the director of the local branch of the International Society of Hypnosis, told patients to use strong visual images to help their bodies' defence systems.

When there are several sets of alternately naming sequences, the 'listing' practice of demarcating them with commas is again operative. In the next sentence, *an association of doctors using hypnotherapy* is an alternate name for *the International Society of Hypnosis*, just as *the director of the local branch of the International Society of Hypnosis* is an alternate name for *Dr Allen Aitken*:

Dr Allen Aitken, the director of the local branch of the International Society of Hypnosis, an association of doctors using hypnotherapy, told patients to use strong visual images to help their bodies' defence systems.

Noun phrases as a list

When objects or abstractions are named by noun phrases, each phrase is one item of a list. Each must be demarcated by a comma:

At the station, buses for transporting them to the venue, trucks carrying foodstuffs, and car-loads of youth-workers had assembled long before the children arrived.

Please note the highlighted comma in the sentence above: it is there despite the fact that the last item of the list, *car-loads of youth-workers*, is preceded by *and*. Had *and* been omitted, the writer would have made the unwanted sense 'trucks carrying foodstuffs and car-loads of youth-workers'. No, the trucks carrying foodstuffs did not carry the car-loads of youth-workers too! No such meaning issue arises in the next sentence:

Love of adventure, desire for knowledge and thirst for experience packed our travel plans.

In the following sentence, the content of the copular verb *have long heard* is named by the noun phrase *about World War Two*. This noun-phrase is followed by three noun phrases: *from the point of view of veterans*, *in books by contemporary historians* and *in the writings of journalists* that locate the context of the activity *have long heard*. These locative noun phrases, being items of a list, must be demarcated. The first and the second are demarcated with a commas, the second and third with and:

We have long heard about World War Two from the point of view of veterans, in books by contemporary historians and in the writings of journalists.

Adjective phrases as a list

The two phrases: *topped by a little ornamental balustrade* and *its varnish chipped and soiled* describe the noun *writing desk*. These phrases constitute a list of two independent descriptions (though the former is an adjective phrase and the latter a foreshortened sentence acting as an adjective phrase) and must be demarcated from each other. (Please see Chapter 6, 'The Composite Sentence', for a description of the foreshortened sentence.)

He noticed a writing desk topped by a little ornamental balustrade, its varnish chipped and soiled.

The next sentence lists adjective phrases to describe the noun *tendency*: *towards big government*, *[towards] big taxing* and *[towards] centralisation of power* and *[towards] decision-making about our daily lives by faceless boardroom bosses*. Each adjective phrase is an item of a list and must be demarcated:

He has risked his business neck by introducing measures that will reverse the present tendency towards big government, big taxing, centralisation of power and decision-making about our daily lives by faceless boardroom bosses.

Single-word adjectives and relative-phrases

Independent adjectives, and some relative phrases, must be demarcated by commas. Both are discussed below.

Adverb phrases as a list

The next sentence has a 'verb + subject' basic sentence. In it, the adverb phrases *when we called him*, *no matter the day* and *no matter the hour* all describe the time of the subject's act came. As items of a list of adverbial descriptions of the verb *came*, they must be demarcated by commas:

The doctor came when we called him, no matter the day, no matter the hour.

The necessary comma and the present-participle phrase

The present-participle phrase must be demarcated with a comma from the basic sentence when that phrase seeks to attach to its verb. In the next sentence, the basic sentence, *Coleridge's private notebooks enable us to listen to a Coleridge conversation*, is demarcated by a comma, which enables the present-participle

phrase *giving a taste of the verbal skills with which he so often bedazzled his listeners* to attach successfully to the verb *enable*:

Coleridge's private notebooks *enable us to listen to a Coleridge conversation, giving a taste of the verbal skills with which he so often bedazzled his listeners.*

The necessary comma and the composite sentence

In a composite sentence (see the Chapter 6, 'The Composite Sentence'), commas demarcate:

(i) the listed sentences (in blue font) and the 'result' sentence (in green font):

He is dumbfounded, he is dazed, he doesn't know what to say, so I feel free to laugh.

(ii) the foreshortened sentence (underlined):

Infatuated, the boy gave her his favourite teddy bear.

The opposition, knowing the popularity of the government's attitude to the war, was reluctant to criticise the military high command.

(iii) The attributing sentence (underlined):

'That you are entitled to the view is beyond doubt', he smiled.

The dining room is, he hastened to inform us, for the use of members only.

(iv) The direct-address (vocative) noun or noun phrase (underlined):

You've burnt the meat, Chef.

Year 12 students, please do your homework before you go out.

Meanings that make the comma either obligatory or wrong

The comma can make meaning for reason alone of its presence or absence in a sentence. Its use in specific circumstances is therefore either obligatory or wrong, depending on the meaning the writer wants to make.

The comma, meaning and the relative phrases

It is the comma that determines the meaning that relative phrases make. In this sentence, the meaning is: All things that are 'electricity-distributing companies' are 'things that lost money':

Electricity-distributing companies, which lost money because of the blackouts, want compensation.
All electricity-distributing companies lost money.

Meaning changes when the commas are removed from this sentence. It becomes: 'Some things that are electricity-distributing companies' are 'things that lost money':

Electricity-distributing companies that lost money because of the blackouts want compensation.
Only some electricity-distributing companies lost money.

Comma-determined meanings of this kind occur in the next sentences:

Mothers, who have a well developed sense of the ridiculous, are easy going.
All mothers have a well-developed sense of the ridiculous, so all are easy going.

Mothers who have a well developed sense of the ridiculous are easy going.
Only those mothers who have a well developed sense of the ridiculous are easy going.

The last scene, in which the reconciled family sang to mother's piano accompaniment, was altogether too sentimental.
The scene was the last scene (of a play or a film), and the family sang together.

The last scene in which the reconciled family sang to mother's piano accompaniment was altogether too sentimental.
The scene was the last scene in which the family sang together, but not the last scene of the play/film.

My son, Andrew, is a law student.
I have one son and his name is Andrew.

My son Andrew is a Law student.
I have several sons and one is named Andrew.

The author, whom you know, is speaking tonight.
You know the author who is speaking tonight.

The author whom you know is speaking tonight.
The author you know, not one you do not know, is speaking tonight.

The comma, meaning and -ly words

Words such as ‘hopefully’, ‘obviously’, ‘clearly’ can be used either as adverbs or as the heads of foreshortened sentence that splices to make a composite sentence. The comma determines that they are foreshortened sentences and distinguishes their meaning from that of the adverbs:

ADVERBS	FORESHORTENED SENTENCES
They came home hopefully. The came home full of hope.	They came home, hopefully. I hope they came home.
The men did not hurt him obviously. The men did hurt him, but it did not show.	The men did not hurt him, obviously. It is obvious that the men did not hurt him.
The old man cannot see clearly. The old man’s vision is not clear.	The old man cannot see, clearly. It is clear that the old man cannot see.

Complex-sentence wordings are sometimes identical with compound-sentence or complex sentence wordings. In the next sentences, commas determine that they are complex sentences, and distinguishes their meanings from those of the compound sentences:

COMPLEX SENTENCE	COMPOUND SENTENCE
I didn’t buy it, because it was expensive. I didn’t buy it. It was expensive.	I didn’t buy it because it was expensive. I bought it for some reason other than that it was expensive.
While the stench was pervasive, it was not dangerous. The stench was pervasive, but it was not dangerous.	While the stench was pervasive it was not dangerous. The stench was not dangerous during the time that it was pervasive.

Wrongly used commas

The comma, like any other internal sentence marker, can be used only at a syntactic juncture in the sentence. There is no syntactic juncture in any sequence that is one syntactic unit. So there is no syntactic juncture in:

- the basic sentence;
- the foreshortened sentence;
- the attributing sentence;
- phrases;
- between a noun (or noun phrase) and the adjective (or adjective phrase) that describes it.

If a comma is placed at any point in the sentence that is not a syntactic juncture, then that comma is wrongly used. The following wrong uses of the comma are common. Common to all of them is the failure to realise that they mark a point that is not a syntactic juncture.

The comma that disrupts a basic sentence

There is no juncture between a subject and its object or complement. There cannot be: 'Subject and object/complement' is the syntactic unit 'basic sentence'. Failure to recognise the subject can lead writers into the mistake of disrupting a basic sentence:

WRONGLY USED COMMA

That he knows it to be completely illegal in this country, is not going to prevent his doing it.

The noun phrase *That he knows it to be completely illegal in this country* names the subject every bit as much as if it were the one-word name *John*. Nobody would write 'John, is not going to stop him', because everybody knows that there is no syntactic juncture in the text of a basic sentence. This holds true also when the subject is named by a noun phrase. The sentence above should have been written thus:

That he knows it to be completely illegal in this country is not going to prevent his doing it.

The same mistake occurs in the following sentence. The subject is named by the noun phrase *This travelling circus of amateur athletes*:

wrongly used comma

This travelling circus of amateur athletes, is ludicrous beyond anyone's imagination.

It should have been written without a comma:

This travelling circus of amateur athletes is ludicrous beyond anyone's imagination.

Long sentences often prompt people to drop in a comma for appearance sake. This writer's comma was probably one of those jobs. It did only harm, as such 'drops' are wont to do. It disrupted his basic sentence:

wrongly used comma

The hope that Australians would become as enthusiastic about science as they are about sport, prompted calls for a national innovation institute.

The comma should not have disrupted the basic sentence:

The hope that Australians would become as enthusiastic about science as they are about sport *prompted* calls for a national innovation institute.

Just as the comma must not disrupt the basic sentence, so it must not separate the 'subject + verb' sentence from the adverb that describes the verb:

wrongly used comma (the first one)

He came, later than expected, keen to surprise us.

There should be no comma after 'came', for that comma wrongly separates the verb and the adverb (underlined) that describes it:

He *came* later than expected, keen to surprise us.

(Nobody would even contemplate a comma after 'came' in the foregoing sentence if 'later' were the only word of its adverb complement. At best, it is arguable that this writer demarcated *later than expected* with commas because his intention was to emphasise it; so these commas are performing a rhetorical function. But then, a comma is a syntactic marker, not a rhetorical marker.)

The comma that disrupts a noun phrase

This writer demarcated the adjectival element of his noun phrase and thereby disrupted it:

WRONGLY USED COMMA

The strike, over the new nurses' pay award, entered its second day today.

The phrase *over the nurses' pay award* should not have been demarcated. This entire noun phrase (underlined) names the subject:

The strike over the new nurses' pay award *entered its second day* today but hospitals reported minimal disruption to services.

In the next sentence, the disrupted noun phrase is the very one that specifies the content of the subject's act *said*. The disruption hampers that specification:

WRONGLY USED COMMA

Mr White said that it is safer for residents to make a bushfire plan ahead of time, by deciding to stay or leave in the event of a fire.

There should not have been a comma in this noun phrase (underlined):

Mr White said that it is safer for residents to make a bushfire plan ahead of time by deciding to stay or leave in the event of a fire.

The comma that disrupts a foreshortened sentence

Some writers become nervous when their descriptive sequences get to be longish, and they scratch in a comma with a view to tethering it. That sort of comma, however, does not serve a tethering purpose. It disrupts instead, making the reader lose track of what is being described. This writer's sentence is an example of the disrupting comma in an adjective phrase-cum-foreshortened sentence

WRONGLY USED COMMA

Well located, in an elevated position, on a wide block by the river, the house features ornate ceilings and leadlight windows.

The foreshortened sentence *Well located in an elevated position on a wide block by the river* is the adjective that describes the subject *the house* of the independent sentence with which it splices. There is no role for commas in it:

Well located in an elevated position on a wide block by the river, the house features ornate ceilings and leadlight windows.

The optional comma

Writers sometimes place commas at syntactic junctures where they are not necessary. They do this because they like to, or in order to achieve certain stylistic effects. So long as they are at syntactic junctures, these placements are not wrong uses of the comma. But it is just as well to remember that contemporary publication favours a lightly punctuated text. In the light of this, it is best to avoid using all but the necessary commas.

The comma with a compounding operator

A celebrated stylist had this to say about commas used with compounding operators:

You are very free with yr commas. I always reduce them to a minimum & use an 'and' or an 'or] as a substitute, not as an addition. Let us argue it out.

Winston Churchill 1922, to Edward Marsh, quoted by David Irving

There certainly is a good case against using commas in the compound sentence. In it, the compounding operators (underlined) mark the syntactic junctures of a sentence. They makes the comma superfluous:

He went away despite our advice.

We did not approach him because we knew he was promised to a rival firm.

Although he is still under twenty he is a self-made millionaire.

While it is true that he committed this crime it is also true that he is not a habitual criminal.

A comma with the compounding operator in the spliced ‘result’ sentence of a composite sentence is another matter. It has its list to plead: If the comma does not mark the final item of that list, then the reader, expecting another item, trips on the unexpected ‘result’ sentence (underlined):

A great deal of modernism is absurd, much of what passes for its theory is intellectual butterfly-catching, most of its proponents are lightweights, yet Jones is awe-struck by its wisdom.

The longish compounding-operator regulated sentence has its length to plead the need for the comma. Such a sentence might even have a coincidence of the same or similar words that make a comma essential:

While shards are being talked up by their architect promoters as the features that make skylines pleasingly a-symmetrical, a-symmetry of skylines features little in the thoughts of developers who also talk them up.

Commas when an adverb phrase embeds the basic sentence

Adverb-led phrases can but need not be demarcated from the basic sentence of which they are not an integral part. Adverb phrases in these sentences are not parts of the basic sentences:

This painting is before anything else **a study** of the painter's soul.

This painting is, before anything else, **a study** of the painter's soul.

In her majestic account of the first forty years of Matisse's life **Martha Harris shows how wrong we were** about the artist.

In her majestic account of the first forty years of Matisse's life, **Martha Harris shows how wrong we were** about the artist.

Rights and the expendable comma

The writer who likes to use commas at all available syntactic junctures will argue that they help the reader through a sentence. That writer has to be allowed to exercise his taste in the matter. But the one who inclines to using his commas sparingly must also be allowed his preference. Should anyone on his behalf insert commas he chose to do without, he is fully entitled to object.

The striking-out of an 'unnecessary' comma can earn the incautious editor some well-deserved castigation. The one who denuded this sentence of its commas, on the ground that they are separating a predicate-adjective phrase from the subject it describes, had it pointed out, to her embarrassment, that the commas are properly demarcating a foreshortened sentence:

Poetry springs, unbidden and perfectly formed, directly from his experiences.

The parenthetical comma

Writers often demarcate a sequence that is both an adjective and a foreshortened sentence. They do this in order to emphasise it. In the next sentence, the writer wanted the sequence *known both as Alan Ward and Thomas Jeffreys* to do more than just describe the subject, *This elusive man*: He wanted it to make the point that a man is known both as 'Alan Ward' and as 'Thomas Jeffreys'. That point is an 'aside', or a parenthetical departure, from the point his sentence is making. No editor is licensed to meddle with his intention by deleting the parenthetical commas:

This man, known both as Alan Ward and Thomas Jeffreys, **managed to evade the** most rigorous **police hunt** ever launched in this State.

On the other hand, some writers are such zealous employers of the comma that they become irritating:

The pact signed, and, just for formality's sake, also sealed, **our host reached**, ceremoniously, **for the** champagne **bottle**.

There must be sympathy for the editor who disallows this accumulation of gratuitous commas:

The pact signed and just for formality's sake also sealed, **our host reached** ceremoniously **for the** champagne **bottle**.

The comma does not rescue bad construction

There is no point in trying to ‘doctor’ a badly constructed sentence with a comma. The comma simply is not up to the job. The writer of this sentence inserted a comma in the hope of healing its ambiguity:

DEFECTIVE SENTENCE

In the light of the fact that he is very well qualified, we will reconsider his retrenchment.

There are two possible statement here:

(i) When we reconsider his retrenchment we will do so in the light of the fact that he is very well qualified.

(ii) Because he is very well qualified we will reconsider his retrenchment.

This writer probably mistook the expression ‘in the light of the fact that he is very well qualified’ for ‘because’. Apparently uncomfortable with his composition, he hoped to improve it by scratching in a comma. However, a comma will not correct the misuse of an expressions, nor the ambiguous sentence it is responsible for constructing.

The comma and single-word adjectives

When adjectives describe as sequential single words (not as phrases) they perform as sets of independent descriptions of nouns, or as sets of interdependent descriptions of them.

Single-word adjectives as independent descriptions

Independent adjectives display the discrete facets of the noun they are describing. They list descriptions. As items of a list, these descriptions are necessarily separated by commas.

That smelly, dirty, ragged coat is still his favourite one.

Adjective as interdependent descriptions

Interdependent adjectives describe a noun by defining it. They are part of the naming sequence ‘noun phrase’. They must not be demarcated by commas precisely because they are the constituent parts of a noun phrase. In the following sentence, the noun phrase, *the little old lady who lives next door*, is also an alternate name for ‘Kate’:

Kate, the little old lady who lives next door, **gave us a cake**.

As we noted above, the noun phrase that names the subject alternatively is always demarcated by commas. Commas may not interrupt this naming sequence to demarcate its adjectives (underlined in the sentence above).

The different ‘doings’ of independent and interdependent single-word adjectives

The independent-adjective sequence of each of the following sentences has the meaning-template of the copula basic sentence in which the subject is described by predicate adjectives and/or defined by a predicate noun-complement.

In the next sentence there is a simple operation in which the copula *was* attributes three independent descriptions to the subject *Lord Byron* by means of three independent predicate adjectives: *mad*, *bad* and *dangerous to know*. Being independent adjectives, they must be demarcated with commas:

Lord Byron *was* mad, bad and dangerous to know.
[the] mad, [the] bad, [the] dangerous-to-know Lord Byron.

SUBJECT	COPULA	PREDICATE ADJECTIVES
Lord Byron	was	mad, bad and dangerous to know.

But there is a much more complex operation in the next sentence. It deserves its own heading;

The defining-copula templates of interdependent adjectives

Elizabeth David *was* an elegant, witty, charming minor monster.
[the] elegant, [the] witty, [the] charming minor monster Elizabeth David.

SUBJECT	COMPLEMENT	
	COPULA	NOUN DESCRIBED BY ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES
Elizabeth David	was	an elegant, witty, charming minor monster.

Here, the copula *was* attributes the definition *charming minor monster* to the subject *Elizabeth David*. But the independent adjectives *elegant*, *witty* describe the predicate noun *charming minor monster*, not the noun subject *Elizabeth David*. So they are attributive adjectives, not predicate adjectives. Each of them describes the *minor monster* independently of the other. So the comma properly demarcates them from each other, and from the interdependent adjectives *charming minor* that follow to describe *monster*.

Unlike the independent adjectives, *charming* and *minor* attach inseparably to the noun *monster*, to the point that they are a formative part of the naming function of that noun.

Effectively, therefore, we have here a copula that behaves mathematically, rather like the ‘=’ sign; to the left of it we have the

definiendum, and to the right the *definientia*. In short, we have a definition, or an account of the meaning, of *Elizabeth David* (the *definiendum*) in terms of *charming minor monster* (the *definientia*).

So I hazard a rule: **Whenever we identify an instance of adjectives that attach to a complement noun to become *definientia*, we know for certain that those adjectives are interdependent ones that may not be demarcated by commas.**

It pays to look closely into this newly minted rule, so we proceed with:

The defining-copula templates of interdependent adjectives

It is interesting to observe that interdependent adjectives have a discernible copula sentence logic. Here are several such sentences:

1. Pompous military regulations prevented wives accompanying their husbands.

Regulations that prevented wives accompanying their husbands = pompous military regulation.

2. Before Pushkin there were a few minor poets in Russia.

A few minor poets = poets in Russia before Pushkin.

3. Diego Rivera rapidly became the most famous Mexican painter.

The most famous Mexican painter = Diego Riviera.

Another way of identifying the interdependent adjectives

As noted above, interdependent adjectives are a formative part of the naming function of the noun. So deciding which adjectives perform that function is the essential task. In this sentence, for instance:

This quiet, self-effacing Tokyo artist has languished in captivity for years,

the primary identification of *artist* is achieved by *Tokyo*, which is functioning as an adjective here. So the independent adjectives *quiet*, *self-effacing* each describe the *Tokyo artist*, not just *artist*. That is why there is no comma between the adjectives *self-effacing* and *Tokyo*.

To put this another way: *Tokyo artist* is the unit that performs the naming function. So it is part of the noun. And that adjective is never separated by a comma from the noun it describes.

More interesting things happen in this sentence:

His famous aged, highly spiced game sauce tempted us.

Clearly enough, *game* is the primary description/identification of the noun *sauce*. And *aged*, *highly spiced* describe *game sauce* independently. But, taking out these independent adjectives:

His famous game sauce,

we are left with two dependent adjectives. That forces us to conclude that *famous* joins *game* as identifier of *game sauce*. So it is *famous game sauce* that achieves the full naming of the item *sauce* that is described by the independent adjectives *aged*, *highly spiced*. This writer simply chose to put these independent adjectives into the context of the 'noun + interdependent adjectives' naming unit: *famous game sauce*.

Independent and interdependent adjective sequences and the 'and' test

'Are they describing or defining/naming?' is the criterion for distinguishing the independent-adjective sequence from the interdependent one. If they are describing, then 'and' is capable of intervening. If they are defining, then 'and' cannot intervene. The following adjectives, for instance, are **not** saying of *a bonnet* that is *a chancellor's* and is *floppy* and *velvet* and *doctoral*:

One inclines to advise him to stick to beer and boating, and to warn him that he might look strange under a chancellor's floppy velvet doctoral bonnet.

Rather, they are saying that *a bonnet = a chancellor's floppy velvet doctoral bonnet*. They are therefore defining *bonnet*. Applied to this sentence, the 'and' test fails, revealing the definitive, interdependent character of an adjective sequence. Being definitive, that sequence is part of a naming sequence and is therefore a set of interdependent adjectives that must not be demarcated by commas.

The next sentence will sustain the 'and' test:

There was a great spirit about the Club, quite unlike a nasty, stifling nuclear-family's.

It is saying of the *nuclear-family's spirit* that it is *nasty* and *stifling*. Sustaining the 'and' test, these adjectives reveal themselves to be independent descriptions that must be demarcated by a comma.

The independent adjectives in this sentence also sustain the *and* test. These are therefore independent adjectives that describe *His ... ancestral home*:

From the formality of his large, opulent, dignified ancestral home, he pads out in bare feet to greet the visitor.

From the formality of his large and opulent and dignified ancestral home, he pads out in bare feet to greet the visitor.

A suitable generalisation to wind up this discussion of the comma that demarcates independent adjectives but not interdependent ones is this: If a sequence of adjectives describe the noun independently, those are independent adjectives that are demarcated with commas. Adjectives that take part in the naming function are not demarcated by commas.

Finally, a caution: The failure to distinguish independent and interdependent adjective sequences accounts for the most common abuse of the comma in the daily press. Writers should be on their guard when they read newspapers.

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