**The Guide, the Ultimate Guide, to Using Commas**

**What is a comma?**

This is a comma → **,**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “A comma marks a slight break between different parts of a sentence. Used properly, commas make the meaning of sentences clear by grouping and separating words, phrases, and clauses.”

**How do I know when to use one?**

Use a comma:

1. **Before a coordinating conjunction/FANBOY\*** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

-“I wanted to meet Abraham Lincoln**,** so I built a time machine.”

-“He was nice enough**,** but he wouldn’t let me wear his hat.”

*(\*See our Comma Splice handout for more explanation on this.)*

1. **After conjunctive adverbs** (adverbs which join 2 sentences together) (however, therefore, finally, meanwhile, likewise, etc.)

-“I wanted to go to the circus; however**,** I have a crippling fear of clowns.”

-“I was sleeping soundly in my bed; meanwhile**,** there was a murderous clown outside my window.”

1. **After introductory phrases**

-“Despite my friend’s protest**,** I bought a million balloons.”

-“After I floated away**,** my friend was mad at me.”

1. **When adjectives are used after a noun**

-“Alex’s singing**,** loud and beautiful**,** filled the room.”

(Another way of phrasing this: “Alex’s loud and beautiful singing filled the

room” → In English the adjective usually comes before the noun, but can

be placed after the noun if commas are used.)

1. **When writing lists**

-“I went to the store to buy a box of cereal**,** a carton of milk**,** a loaf of

bread**,** and several bags of candy.”

-“The indecisive man was triple-majoring in Electrical Engineering**,**

History**,** and Floral Arranging.”

1. **When using a direct quotation**

-“I believe it was George Washington who famously said**,** ‘Dude, follow me

on Twitter!’”

1. **When speaking to someone directly**

-“George Washington**,** please stop bothering me about social media.”

1. **When using an interjection**

-“Hey**,** I thought George Washington only used Instagram!”

1. **When using a parenthetical expression** (a brief phrase which gives extra information which**,** although useful**,** is not necessary) (←psst, that was an example of one.)

-“The bear**,** hoping to entertain the sad campers**,** frollicked around the

camp site.”

-“The campers**,** who were perplexed and terrified**,** hid in their tents.”

1. **When using appositives** (an explanation of who/what the noun refers to)

-“Chester A. Arthur**,** the 21st president of the United States**,** had a

fabulously magnificent mustache.”

1. **To show contrast between two parts of a sentence**

-“I asked for a slice of pizza**,** not a chainsaw!”

-”Niles belongs with Daphne**,** not Maris.”

1. **To emphasize an adverb** (This is more of an optional comma, and acts as a stylistic choice for the writer.)

-“Romeo swam**,** quickly, but Juliet was still eaten by the sea monster.”

(Note: the sentence is also correct: “Romeo swam quickly**,** but Juliet was

still eaten by the sea monster.”)

1. **With titles after a name**

“I only trust Peter Venkman**,** Ph.D.”

(Note: A comma would not be necessary if the sentence read:

“I only trust Dr. Peter Venkman” because the title comes before the

name.)

1. **With dates**

“We all know that William Shakespeare finally mastered synchronized

swimming on July 4**,** 1995.”

1. **To separate cities and states**

“Vancouver**,** Washington”

“He lied when he said that he was from Evergreen**,** Colorado.”

1. **In numbers larger than 999**

I have 1**,**000 problems but the declining popularity of the beeper isn’t one.

**What is an Oxford comma?**

The Oxford comma, sometimes called the “serial comma,” is used before the “and” in a list of items. While Oxford commas have traditionally been considered optional, they are often preferred because they can help to add clarity to a sentence.

INCORRECT: **Bring me a burger, soda and fries.**

*(Here’s why: This sentence is confusing without the Oxford comma because it may*

*sound like the speaker is asking the soda and fries to bring them a burger.)*

CORRECT: **Bring me a burger, soda, and fries**.

*(Here’s why: The use of the Oxford comma here separates the list and clarifies that*

*three different items are being requested. The speaker is asking for a burger and a soda*

*and fries.)*

**Why commas are important:**

INCORRECT: **Let’s eat Santa Claus!**

*(Here’s why: The lack of a comma changes the meaning of the sentence. This*

*sounds as if Santa’s life is in danger because someone is planning to eat him.)*

CORRECT: **Let’s eat, Santa Claus!**

*(Here’s why: The comma now implies that Santa is the person being addressed.*

*Santa is safe now because he is simply being invited to eat.)*

INCORRECT: **To our dinner, I invited the elves, Santa and Mrs. Claus.**

*(Here’s why: Because there is no Oxford comma used, this sentence implies that Santa and Mrs. Claus are elves.)*

CORRECT: **To our dinner, I invited the elves, Santa, and Mrs. Claus.**

*(Here’s why: The use of the Oxford comma here clarifies that three separate*

*people/groups are being discussed. The individuals who are invited to dinner are*

*the elves and Santa and Mrs. Claus.)*

Additional sources:

Elliot, Rebecca. *Painless Grammar*. Barron’s Educational Series, 1997.

Goldstein, Barbara, et al. *Grammar To Go*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.