

LUC WRITING CENTER – “COMMA USAGE”

Commas and Lists:

The *comma* has a wide variety of uses, but one of the most common of these is to separate items in a list:

“I invited Stan, Phil, and Henry to dinner.”

At some point in your academic career, you might encounter some controversy surrounding the use of the “Oxford comma.” **The Oxford comma** (also called the **serial comma**) is placed before the conjunction at the end of a list. The main argument in favor of the comma involves clarity; there are situations in which a missing comma at the end of a list can skew the meaning of the sentence.

Here’s a famous example:

“I dedicate this book to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.”

Unless your parents are actually Ayn Rand and God, omitting the Oxford comma can expose you to humorous ridicule.

However, leaving out the Oxford comma is not *technically wrong* – norms vary between countries, mediums, institutions, and style guides. It’s important, however, to be conscious of which style you’re using and why.

Comma Splices:

A **comma splice** is a common error. It occurs when a comma is used to join two independent clauses but there isn’t a conjunction following the comma.

Example: *“I finished my paper on Paradise Lost at 1:00am yesterday morning, I watched TV until 2:00am.”*

There are three easy ways to fix this comma splice:

- 1) **Change the comma to a semi-colon**, (i.e. *“I finished my paper on Paradise Lost at 1:00am yesterday morning; I watched TV until 2:00am.”*)
- 2) **Change the comma to a period and turn the independent clauses into separate sentences**, (i.e. *“I finished my paper on Paradise Lost at 1:00am yesterday morning. I watched TV until 2:00am.”*)

OR

- 3) **Keep the comma, but add a conjunction after it to link the clauses** (i.e. *“I finished my paper on Paradise Lost at 1:00am yesterday morning, **but** I watched TV until 2:00am.”*)

Independent Clauses:

An independent clause is a series of words containing a subject and a predicate (meaning that it can be a stand-alone sentence). If you add a dependent clause to an independent clause, it should be set off with a comma. If you begin a sentence with an introductory or prepositional phrase, it should be set off from the independent clause with a comma (the examples below show the previous three cases in the order listed):

- 1) “I’ll go to the doctor eventually, but only if I start feeling worse.”
- 2) “Unfortunately, the article’s provocative claims are undermined by the dubious methods of the author.”

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- 3) “On the top shelf of the cupboard, you will find an extra set of silverware.”

Appositives:

Appositives need to be enclosed by commas. An appositive is a noun or a short descriptive phrase that identifies a noun preceding it.

- 1) “Part II of *The Sound and the Fury* is narrated by Caddy’s oldest brother, Quentin, whose fragmented narrative is exemplary of Faulkner’s innovative modernist aesthetic.”
- 2) “Edmund Burke, one of the major critics of the French Revolution, was an important eighteenth century political theorist and philosopher.”

Parentheticals:

Appositives, described above, are a specific kind of parenthetical phrase or statement. *Parentheticals* are, generally, descriptors embedded in a sentence that modify, identify, or provide new information about a noun. They are enclosed by commas and can be removed from the sentence without rendering it grammatically incorrect. Parentheticals can also come at the beginning or end of a sentence, as demonstrated by the second example.

- 1) “*The Sun Also Rises*, which I read over winter break, is one of Ernest Hemingway’s most famous novels.”
- 2) “The tsetse fly, which is found throughout much of Sub-Saharan Africa, is the primary vector for the disease trypanosomiasis, more commonly known as sleeping sickness.”

Coordinate Adjectives:

Coordinate adjectives are accorded equal status in the sentence and don’t need to be listed in a certain sequence. They should be separated by commas.

“I found the reading for today’s class to be dry, dense, and unrewarding.”

Adjectives that need to be listed in a certain order **do not require a comma.**

“I rode my bike up the hill to the bright yellow house.”

Resources:

This hand-out describes some of the most common uses of the comma, but it is not exhaustive. Consult the resources below for more help.

- [“Commas: Quick Rules”](#) (Purdue OWL)
- [“Commas.”](#) (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)