

The Use and Abuse of the Oxford Comma

Grace Long

Abstract

This piece is being published as a part of a Digital Portfolio course under the guidance of Dr. Kerrie Farkas. The Use and Abuse of the Oxford Comma is an article that discusses the who, what, when, why, and how of the Oxford Comma. The 'who' in who helped create and establish it in the English language and those using it today. The 'what' being all about the past and present of this controversial little inkblot. 'When' this comma was created and when to use it. 'Why' the oxford version of a comma is important and why should someone use it. Lastly, 'how' is it used both today and in the beginning of its use. All of the Ws that we learned in grade school are answered briskly in this article. I hope by the end all readers will use not abuse the poor, little Oxford Comma.

The Oxford comma is one of the most controversial forms of punctuation. Where did this ambiguous punctuation mark come from and why can't society decide on whether its use is beneficial or not? The comma started as an illuminating dot that made pieces of text more decipherable for orators or public speakers. Oration, being the ancient compositional form consisting of memorizing long tracks of words and reiterating them in front of crowds. According to the University of Wisconsin, commas were used in place of breaths in the written word. (Maguire n.d.) Commas were and still are a stopping point placed in the middle of a statement for an orator or reader to breath between ideas. The English Project states that in 400 CE, Saint Jerome confirmed that the use of the new forms of punctuation like the commata, the

plural form of comma that he used in the Latin translation of the bible, were for oral recitations and for showing where to breathe during performances. (Crystal n.d.) Organized religion, specifically the Christian church was instrumental in creating the structural framework of punctuation that is used today. A framework of punctuation that no reader or writer could do without but typically irritates them to no end.

What is a Comma?

The Oxford Living Dictionary defines the comma as "A punctuation mark indicating a pause between parts of a sentence or separating items in a list." (Oxford Dictionary) According to the English Project, in the late 16th century it meant the shortest pause. The definition of the past focuses on the use of punctuation in reading aloud. It

was an indicator of breath; modern commas focus on separating ideas. The original comma was placed above the word, but because it was easier for printer presses to produce a slash after a word we have the modern comma in the shape of a virgule or twig. The comma was created to end the confusion of long pieces of text with little distinction between the end of one statement and the beginning of another. Over the years, what was once used to alleviate confusion now can cause modern writers' intense irritation.



What is an Oxford Comma?

The Oxford comma, the serial comma, or the Harvard comma depending on who is asked, is relatively new to the world of punctuation. According to the Grammarist, this special comma was first named in publication by Peter H. Sutcliffe. (Grammarist) Adding a little comma at the end of a list, right before an and/or came into use before the introduction by Sutcliffe, but it had not been properly introduced into polite grammarian society. Sutcliffe cemented the Oxford Comma's place in the grammarian world when he published, *The Oxford University Press: The informal history* in 1978, introducing the concept to the world.

The explanation for the use of the Oxford Comma is often ascribed to Horace Hart, who according to the Royal Academy, was the printer and controller of the Oxford University Press from 1883 to 1915. (Royal Academy n.d.) In *Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers*, Harts 1905 publication describes the use of the Oxford comma, but it is not named as such until 1978 in Sutcliffe's novel.

Modern Relevance

It may seem a frivolous problem to contemplate the effectiveness of the Oxford comma, but as the drivers working for Oakhurst Dairy will attest, a comma can make the difference in serious legal disputes. These Maine-based drivers were awarded \$5 million from the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit because a state law lacked an Oxford comma and led to uncertainty in the exact specifications. The lack of an Oxford Comma when listing what qualified as overtime for the drivers made all the difference. (refer to Figure 1 in Appendix) New York Times reported on this matter that if there had been a comma after the word shipment, the case would have never held up and the driver's payday never would have stuck. The day-and-a-half payment state law would not have taken affect had it not been for the missing comma. Though the NYT demonstrates the efficacy in legal writing, they also mention that the Times stylebook "discourages the use of the Oxford comma because of its traditional use by the Oxford University Press." (Victor, 2018) The legal benefits of the Oxford comma are clear, but it is still foggy whether it is appropriate to use in journalistic pursuits.

Journalistic Use

Chiming in on the subject of journalistic pursuits, The Columbia Journalism Review suggests that the argument should not be about the punctuation itself, but its actions.

Merrill Perlman, a writer for the *CJR*, advises journalists to forget about their feelings toward the little inkblot and look at whether it helps get their point across. The point of a comma has always been to make life easier for the reader, whether they are an ancient poet or a fan of *People* magazine. If the added comma muddles understanding, then don't waste the ink. The Oxford Comma is there to help, not hinder. Long lists may need the comma for clarity, shorter ones may not.

Use in General Writing

The AP stylebook offers a different perspective to that of the *CJR*. Perlman and *CJR* support the use of the Oxford comma as needed for clarity. The AP stylebook vehemently advises against the use, unless absolutely necessary. What is it about this

little comma that can divide so many on its efficacy? The use of the Oxford comma is a defining factor in a writer's style. The lack or abundance of Oxford commas speaks volumes about how the creator sees their writing and how they view grammar. Using the Oxford Comma can insinuate that clarity of statement is most important. Not wasting ink on this comma shows that how the audience understands your writing isn't as important as a lack of redundancy in a piece. Most writers make their choice early on in whether to use the Oxford comma; it is a personal decision for some and a matter of functionality for others. Either way, every writer eventually decides for themselves whether to use or abuse the little inkblot. Though this writer, will always believe in the power of the Oxford comma.

References

- Doll, J. (2013, October 29). *The new AP Stylebook will not end the Oxford COMMA DEBATE*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/new-ap-stylebook-oxford-comma-debate/314787/>.
- English Project. APRIL and the COMMA | English Project. <http://www.englishproject.org/april-and-comma>.
- Freedman, A. (2007, December 16). *Clause and Effect*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/opinion/16freedman.html>.
- Hart, H., Murray, J., & Bradley, H. (1970, January 1). *Rules for composers and readers at the University Press, Oxford* . <https://archive.org/details/rulesforcomposi00bradgoog/page/n18>.
- Horace Hart: Artist: Royal Academy of Arts. (n.d.). <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/horace-hart>
- Inc, S. (n.d) *Where Did the Oxford Comma Come From, and Why Is It So Important?* Scribendi. https://www.scribendi.com/advice/oxford_comma_importance.en.html.
- Lamberg, J. (2016, January 7). *Revealed: The true history of the Oxford comma*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/history-of-the-oxford-comma-2016-1>.
- Maguire. (n.d.). Comma history. http://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/maguirem/history.html
- Oxford Comma*. Grammarist. (n.d.). <https://grammarist.com/punctuation/oxford-comma/>.
- Perlman, M. (2017). *Don't work overtime: The final word on the Oxford comma*. https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/oxford-comma.php.
- Strippers, JFK, and Stalin show the importance of the Oxford Comma*. (2011). Verbiicide. <https://www.verbicidemagazine.com/2011/09/20/strippers-jfk-and-stalin-illustrate-why-you-should-use-the-serial-comma/>.
- Victor, D. (2018, February 9). *Oxford Comma Dispute Is Settled as Maine Drivers Get \$5 Million*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/us/oxford-comma-maine.html>.

Appendix

Figure 1: Legally disputed statement about overtime (Oakhurst, 2018)

**“The canning, processing, preserving, freezing, drying, marketing, storing, packing for shipment or distribution of:
(1) Agricultural produce;
(2) Meat and fish products; and
(3) Perishable foods.”**

Recommended Citation

Long, G. (2021). The use and abuse of the oxford comma. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-40>