

Comma Drama

A comma is a kind of pause, a way to
write a breath,
an invitation to the reader to suck up
some mental oxygen.
— Victor Kryston, *The Wonderful Writing
Skills (Un)Handbook*¹

Let us honor now the comma.

Or should that be, *Let us honor, now, the
comma?*

A debate could be staged either way. I suspect that those whose usage carries a British tinge are more inclined to favor the latter. I suspect further that those who learned to read phonically are also inclined to do so.

I make the remark about British English partly on the basis of a recent reading of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*² (2003), by the British author Lynne Truss. In her treatment of commas used to set off interjections from the remainder of a sentence, she recommends “Stop, or I’ll scream.” I think the urgency of the situation is more properly reflected by “Stop or I’ll scream.” I also think an exclamation point is called for. Certainly no red-blooded American who grew up on gangster movies would interpolate a comma in “Stop or I’ll shoot!” And no one would omit an exclamation point, either.

The phonics versus sight-reading interpretation is harder to divine, it seems to me, but something else that Lynne Truss says in her book makes me want to lean toward the phonetic side: “On the page, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune.”

Exactly. Commas help us interpret how the phrases should sound. For centuries, vocalists have been hearing music directors emphasize—sometimes in exclamatory purple prose—that a comma in lyrics is to be strictly observed: “When you see a comma, take a breath!” The reason is that otherwise the singer will not make it to the end of the phrase that follows without

turning blue and falling off the platform. “O’er the land of the fre-e-e-e [comma—breathe here or faint] and the home of the br. . . .” Thud!

Likely to lapse, perhaps? In his 23 July 2007 *Newsweek* article (“The Sad Fate of the Comma”³), contributing editor Robert Samuelson addressed something I’ve wondered about for some time: “The comma is in retreat, though it is not yet extinct. In text messages and e-mails, commas appear infrequently, and then often by accident (someone hits the wrong key). Even on the printed page, commas are dwindling. Many standard uses from my childhood (after, for example, an introductory prepositional phrase) have become optional or, worse, have been ditched.” Mr. Samuelson goes on to opine that the disappearing comma is only a metaphor for the increasingly frantic pace of our culture—although I’m forced to wonder how many Nebraskans would agree.

After reviewing my own editing work of recent years and performing some study of random clips of prose culled from scholarly publications, the popular press, and better-written blogs, I think Samuelson may be right on some points for some segments of the population (of the United States, at least), even including those who identify themselves as quite literate. I wonder how many readers of this column agree with him (and me).

It seems to me (and to Samuelson, if I read him right) that there are two areas wherein commas are in decline:

After short, introductory prepositional phrases such as *in the future, for reasons unknown, throughout the trial.*

In sentences that begin with introductory adverbials, such as *next, of course, consequently, oddly enough.*

Unlike Samuelson, I do not find evidence that commas separating two longish independent clauses of compound sentences are in any danger of extinction. However, I *do* believe that the trend is evident in the case of two shortish ones.

The Council of Science Editors agrees with this in *Scientific Style and Format*, 7th edition (SSF7) (2006),⁴ but only “if lack of a comma would not produce ambiguity”, preferring *The survey was completed and we went home* to *The survey was completed, and we went home*. In addition to the two areas identified by Samuelson, Lynne Truss suggests that commas before direct speech are “likely to lapse”: *The Queen said[,]* “Doesn’t anyone know that it’s my birthday?”

Lawsuits them right! Bryan Garner (*A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, 1998)⁵ lists nine uses for the comma, and SSF7 lists 14. Owing to its brevity, this column will comment on only one.

Quoting Garner (page 538): “The comma marks the beginning and end of a parenthetical word or phrase, an appositive, or a nonrestrictive clause”: *Fred[,]* *who is bald[,]* *complained of the cold*. Garner then deadpans that “some writers mistakenly omit the second comma.”

Lawyers especially are well advised to plant a comma the size of a tadpole before and after a clause intended as nonrestrictive or parenthetical and to avoid placing—or carefully expunge—any commas around a clause that intends the opposite. Get it wrong and it can result in a colossal legal trainwreck.

In a much-publicized case just settled in Canada, Rogers Communications recently prevailed over Bell Aliant Telecommunications in a breach-of-contract lawsuit.⁶ The court used a single comma in a 14-page contract to decide the matter. Rogers first lost the case in 2006 but won it back on appeal in 2007. Luckily for Rogers, the French version—which did not use commas—straightened out the flawed English version.

The protracted legal wrangle began when the companies signed a contract in 2002. The contract stipulated that it “shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five-year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party”.

It’s the second comma that got Rogers in

trouble. Mistakenly allowing it meant that the final clause gave Bell Aliant the right to terminate the contract at any time after it served a one-year notice (and which notice Aliant could serve at any time, including immediately on striking the deal), whereas Rogers Communications intended to lock Bell Aliant into the agreement for a minimum of five years. (To clarify, reread the agreement and skip the part between the commas.)

The consequences? Had the 2006 decision been allowed to stand, Rogers would have had to pay Aliant at higher rates—amounting to \$2.13 million over 5 years—for using Aliant’s 91,000 utility poles in the Maritime Provinces.

California comma denominator. But the Rogers case is tiny tubers compared with the famous “missing comma” court decision in 2006 that involved the city of San Jose versus the county of Santa Clara (both in California).⁷ The presiding judge decided the case on the basis of the omission of a single comma from a land-use contract that the contesting parties inked in 2001.

The phrase in question read, “The land use provisions of this agreement shall not apply to County-owned land or facilities, or to facilities leased and/or operated by County so long as they are used for County government purposes.”

The court held that the contract’s language needed a second comma after the words “operated by County” to restrict the use of “County-owned [italics added] land or facilities” to “County government purposes”. As it stood, the contract restricted only “facilities leased and/or operated by County” to county government purposes. That meant that the county of Santa Clara could use the land it *owned* for *commercial* uses. The county proceeded to build a 7000-seat concert hall on its land on county fairgrounds, which border the city of San Jose on the south. San Jose sued and blocked construction.

The county countersued and won \$36.5 million from the city in damages and denied the city profits that the hall would have generated over the 5-year period.

Chuckle(s) of the month. Sir Ernest Gowers was a distinguished civil servant who served many British governments. He died in 1966. After World War II, the British government asked him to help purge the errors from its official documents and take a pruning hook to the bramble-thicket of their prose. The result was *Plain Words*⁸ (1948), which became an instant classic and enjoyed many revisions and printings.

Herewith, two gems, the first involving a pronoun with a vague antecedent, the second involving misplaced commas around an intended restrictive clause. Baby-care booklet: “If your baby does not thrive on raw milk, boil it.” Flight-crew instruction manual: “Pilots, whose minds are dull, do not usually live long.”

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