

The problem with commas 1: comma basics

The humble little comma (,) seems to be disappearing from much modern written communication. While some believe that this is a style issue, I lean towards the idea that people have simply found the idea of navigating through the rules of punctuation far too difficult. This includes those young people who head out into primary school teaching and realise that they may not know the ins and outs of it themselves. One of the first difficulties, then, is that commas provide an absolutely necessary service by improving readability and clarity. This article tries to address the issue of basic comma usage; it explains what commas are and what they do, and it provides some ways of getting your head around how and where to use them.

What is a comma?

Many people believe that before you can understand the technicalities of punctuation, you need to know what the item of punctuation is and what it does. However, I think that comma usage can be largely instinctual, once you know a few tiny things about it. Those who have a natural instinct for the more advanced rules are few and far between, and most of those are editors!

So, to start off with, what is a comma? A comma, according to the Macquarie Concise Dictionary (3rd Edn.), is 'a mark of punctuation (,) used to indicate the smallest interruptions in continuity of thought or grammatical construction'.

In one sense, then, using a comma should be the simplest thing in the world. If you read out your writing you will 'feel' where the commas need to go by finding those tiny 'interruptions in continuity of thought or grammatical construction'. You don't need to have a strong knowledge of grammatical construction to know where they occur if you can read reasonably well. People who are good readers know 'by experience' where the grammar changes. But, let's look at each part of the Macquarie definition in detail.

Interruptions in continuity of thought

The first part of the Macquarie's definition is, to my mind, one of the easiest ways to work out where a comma ought to go. This is because you

can read a piece of writing aloud and work out from there where many of the commas need to go in.

If you are fluent in reading aloud (if you're a writer, it's good to practise until you are), then where you naturally take a slight pause, where you need to gain a breath, where you 'feel' the natural breaks in the writing: that's where the commas go. Some brilliant classic works, and some highly revered writers, use their commas so naturally that when you read their works aloud it is actually effortless. You don't need to think about the prose in order to read it, because it's all there for you. To my mind, this is the ideal of grammatical construction and effective punctuation. If you can read out a work effortlessly, and you don't get stuck in a sentence wondering 'what the writer means by that', even though the writer might have used very basic vocabulary, then the grammar is spot-on and the punctuation follows suit.

Commas, so the AGPS Style Guide states, mark 'the smallest break in the continuity of a sentence', and that it can 'enhance clarity in a number of important ways'. An example that the Style Guide provides is a good one for demonstrating how commas help you to avoid ambiguous construction. The example used is 'He was not run over, mercifully'. The same sentence, but without the comma, could mean that he was in fact run over, but that he was mercilessly run over - if such a thing is possible.

Grammatical construction

Here is where the difficulties lie. There is a wonderful linguistics lecturer at the University of South Australia, Mia Stephens, who teaches grammar effortlessly. Her ability to do this is grounded in the fact that she tells her students that if they can speak the language, they know its grammar; what they don't know is the labels for each part of it. Much grammar teaching is needlessly difficult because students get caught up in the idea that 'they don't know' it. If you can read this, you have a flawless understanding of English grammar, but you probably couldn't explain it. This section will give you a brief overview of comma use, but from a grammatical perspective.



I will only include here two examples of grammatical construction, given that it's a comma basics article. The next article, the one on advanced usage, will go into grammar in a bit more detail. For the purposes of the basics, two items will be covered: run-on lists and strings of adjectives.

commas and adjectives: run-on lists

A list of words that is 'run-on', or within a sentence (as opposed to appearing on separate lines in bullet-lists), needs to have its words separated by commas; otherwise it's just a bunch of words all in a line, and that would fail to make much sense. Occasionally you might need to separate the last two items in a list to enhance the clarity of the sentence.

It's an easy rule to remember. Where you have a list, the words comprising the list need to be separated by commas.

Examples: 'We need to bring toothpaste, toothbrushes, and pillows for the sleep-over'; 'That book includes pictures, drawings, diary entries, and pressed flowers'.

commas and adjectives: strings

The rule with separating adjectives is to place a comma between only those adjectives of a similar type. So, you'd separate descriptive adjectives (words describing a thing [noun]: red, fluffy, warm jumper) with commas. If those same adjectives were placed alongside definitive adjectives (words describing a specific or defined thing [noun]) you would only separate the adjectives of the same type. The final type of string eliminates commas altogether, and it includes descriptive, definitive, and evaluative adjectives. An evaluative adjective provides an opinion or appraisal. This type of string doesn't need any commas.

Example of strings of descriptive adjectives:

'Those jumpers are red, warm, fluffy'.

Example of descriptive adjectives and definitive adjective:

'That is a red, warm, fluffy locally made jumper'.

Example of string of descriptive, definitive and

evaluative adjectives: 'That is a lovely warm red jumper'.

More information

The next instalment of this article, advanced comma use, will give you an intimate look into the technicalities of comma use. It will also help to demystify some of grammatical terms, so that you'll be better placed to learn some of what makes our grammar work. So, best of luck with your comma usage, and more importantly: have fun!

Further reading

Commonwealth of Australia, 2002. *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*. John Wiley & Sons.

The Macquarie Library. 1998. *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary*. 3rd Edn. Macquarie University: Sydney.



We all remember sitting in a class at either primary or secondary school where we were trying to write stories. Some people were always considered great at it, some people weren't great but managed to get through breezily, and everyone else struggled to write anything, let alone something acceptable. I still have a vision of a powdery, middle-aged woman standing up the front of my English class in year eight, and banging on about how important description is in your writing. Description, she contended, will bring your story to life.

To a point that is true. Description is what will give a reader a sense of what is going on, a sense of place, a sense of time. Where my agreement with the proposition stops, is in the contention that description brings a story to life. In my experience, description is too often the suffocating factor in much new writing. When it's overdone, or even poorly executed, 'description' can return a raging story back into a smoky mess, it can make readers impatient and tired, and it can be just plain boring.

In many ways, English teachers have a lot to answer for, in terms of encouraging students to produce overly descriptive prose. They are also to be blamed for a lot of formless and technique-less poetry—but that's for another article. School teachers are very rarely writers or editors themselves, and so the continual exhortation to 'description! description! description!' needs to be heeded with the utmost care.

Description makes stories stop

One of the most awful things is to be an intelligent person, and to read a book where the writer leaves absolutely nothing for you to create yourself. These writers walk into a room, describing the entrance. They then cast their eyes around the room and describe every feature and every wall. They tell you the colour of the walls, the texture of the floor, and how shiny the pots and pans on the stove are. They tell you what decorations are in the room and how they have been arranged. They explain how the room connects to other rooms in the house; and if

someone walks into the room, every single thing about that person is described, from the colour and brand of their shoes to the type of shampoo that their hair smells like.

In the meantime, the story has ground to an absolute halt, hopping from foot to foot in the background until the narrator shuts the hell up and it can go on with things. For that is the truth of it: every time a writer gives in to the urge to describe anything and everything, the story stops.

Is description integral to what you're writing?

To determine whether or not you need to head off into Description Land, ask yourself whether it is integral to what you're writing. Does the description add something that would otherwise be lacking, and that is important? It is no good saying 'yes, the house hasn't been described', but is it important that the house is described? Usually, the environment will become obvious through the action. You don't need to describe how Martha's lives in the bush, for instance, if your character walks down a rutted lane through stands of eucalyptus to the house, and sits with Martha on her verandah watching roos fight down the back.

Using the characters and the story to gradually unravel environs and situations is far more palatable to an intelligent reader, because it feels more realistic. Except for those who prefer pulp fiction, most readers don't like having the writer spread the story out in front of them, painstakingly pointing out every tiny detail. Readers prefer to have the story gradually reveal itself, for the connections to gradually become apparent, for narratives to be a little bit unstated.

'Less is more' is a tired old cliché, but one that is a cliché because it is true. That other old cliché 'show, don't tell' also has a ring of truth about it: that will be covered in another article.

Examples of good description

