

The problem with commas 2: advanced commas

Introduction

The previous commas article discussed some of the basic uses of this most subtle, and most frequently misused, punctuation mark.

Before we get into the advanced use of commas, a brief explanation of some grammatical terms would be pertinent.

Definitions

Clause: a part of a sentence, that is a smaller part of a sentence than a phrase. A clause is a unit of about two words, that usually contains a finite verb. The sentence 'Jesus wept' is a clause: it has a defined person (third) and number (singular) in the word 'Jesus', and a verb 'wept'.

Phrase: a phrase is a group of words that together form a single part of speech. Not all phrases have a verb in them: in fact, only 'verb phrases' do - of course! You can have noun phrases, adjectival phrases, adverbial phrases, and so on.

Defining: a part of a clause or phrase that is integral to the meaning.

Parts of a sentence

Main clause: two (or more words), a subject and a verb, that could stand on their own as a complete sentence.

Dependent clauses: the clauses that without the presence of the main clause would fail to make sense. They are 'dependent' in the true sense of the word.

Adverbial clause: two or more words of an adverbial nature. To explain this better, it might be easier to state that a word that 'leans' against a verb, and that usually ends in '-ly' is an adverb. Adverbs often show how, when or why something happened; I like to think that adverbs add meaning to verbs - it's the best way to remember it. Hence, 'she walked slowly up the road' is the sentence 'she walked up the road' and the adverb 'slowly' tells us how she did so.

An adverbial would therefore tell us how, when or why whatever occurred in another phrase happened.

Adjectival clause: two or more words of an adjectival nature. To explain this better, it might be easier to state that a word that 'leans' against a noun as an adjective. It will usually describe the noun; like little kids do, whenever I think 'adjective', I think 'describing word'. Hence, 'the fat man sat on the huge sofa' has two adjectives: 'fat' and 'huge', with the nouns being 'man' and 'sofa'. An adjectival clause would therefore describe something for us.

Examining a sentence using these parts:

The sentence: 'Johnny, who was a well-known stoner, who sucked on the bong as though it would save his life' is comprised of an adjectival clause ('who was a well-known stoner') and an adverbial clause ('as though it would save his life'). The main clause in this sentence is comprised of 'Johnny' and 'sucked on the bong': the other two clauses would not make sense if the main clause was removed.

Advanced Commas continued

So - back to the action! According to the *Oxford Modern Australian Usage* by Nicholas Hudson, 'The comma (,) is the lightest, most used and most abused of the punctuation marks'. But it needn't be because the rules are fairly easy to remember. These more advanced rules are more difficult, but by familiarising yourself with them you will be able to write more clearly and directly.

Coordinate clauses

Remember what a clause is? Well, 'coordinating clauses' are two clauses of equal weight. These types of clauses can often be read as separate sentences, and are usually linked by a conjunction (joining word like but, and, or, yet). If the two



clauses are long and have their own subjects, it's good to separate them with a comma.

For example: 'Feeding apples to goats can make them swell up, but apples are so much cheaper than hay at the moment.'

An exception to this rule is where the coordinate clauses are short, whether they share the same subject or not.

Example: 'The goats ate the apples and they all got really sick'.

Defining clauses

Where information in a clause defines a subject, the information is integral to it. This is a basic rule that is important for the next example, because defining clauses and phrases do not have pairs of commas, whereas incidental (or non-defining) clauses do.

For example: 'The players who wore black smoked pot', tells us that only the players who wore black smoked pot: it is defining information. Whereas, 'The players, who wore black, smoked pot', tells us that the pot-smoking players wore black, but that it's not important information. In fact, the clause 'who wore black' could be removed without altering the meaning of the sentence.

The *AGPS Style Manual* has another good example:

Animals with cloven hoofs can cause serious environmental damage. (defining clause: 'with cloven hoofs')

Animals with cloven hoofs, such as goats and sheep, can cause serious environmental damage. (non-defining clause: 'such as goats and sheep').

Introductory clauses

If you have a clause that is introductory, it needs to be separated from the subject by a comma to avoid ambiguity. This is the case whether the clause is adjectival or adverbial: there is no difference in the application of this rule. But, if the introductory clause is short and there is no possibility of ambiguity, then you don't need a comma.

Contrast these two examples:

'If you're not sure where you can find the books you need, ask at the information desk.'

'If you're not sure ask at the information desk.'

Example of an introductory adjectival clause separated from the subject by a comma:

'Drowsy and befuddled, she flung herself out of bed to answer the door'.

Example of an introductory adverbial clause separated from the subject by a comma:

'Once she was sitting up, Lucy was able to see where she was.'

Expressions that share elements of a statement

In sentences that have two expressions that share an element of a statement, but that aren't the same thing, then you will need to implement a pair of commas.

For example:

'The metalheads in the area are concerned about, but have little influence over, censorship of their albums.'

Appositional elements

The type of element described as 'appositional' is one that has the same function and the same relation to other elements in the sentence. If the appositional element is defining, then you don't need commas; if it is non-defining, then you do.

Example 1 (the non-defining appositional element is in square brackets):

'You should get sufficient sleep, [or at least good rest], if you are to stay healthy.'

Example 2 (the defining appositional element is in square brackets):

'Her husband [Tom] is flying to Perth on Saturday'



Other rules

Numerals.

If the introductory clause or phrase contains, and is immediately followed by, numerals, you need a comma to separate them.

Example: 'In 2008, 500 million mice were slaughtered.'

Time.

Clauses introduced by 'as', 'when', 'since' express an element of time; therefore, to avoid momentary ambiguity, it's good to separate them with a comma. Other clauses introduced by these words might express cause or condition; in this case, they also need to be followed by a comma.

Examples: 1) 'While the old lady fed the ducks, a swan stole up behind her and walked off with her handbag.' 2) 'Since you have performed so well in this role, I think we need to give you a raise.'

Names.

When writing dialogue where a person is being addressed, always separate the character's name by commas no matter where it appears in the sentence.

Example: 'Please, Jenny, can you pass me the salad?'

Direct speech.

Similarly, words used to explain direct speech ('she said', 'he said') should be separated by punctuation; often, it's the comma that takes on the job.

Titles. Titles are always separated from the rest of a sentence with commas (see first example below), unless the title functions like an adjective (see second example below).

Example: 'Jenny Wong, OAM, gave the main address on Anzac Day.'

Example: 'Professor John Citizen delivered a brilliant lecture this morning.'

Common mistakes

Putting a comma between a subject and its verb is a very common mistake - one that you should never do! Now that you've read this article and its predecessor, you'll be able to see that it jars:

'Cats that can't eat birds, will normally eat other things.'

Misplaced parenthetical commas is another common mistake. The key to remembering this rule is that if you remove the entire parenthetical statement, the sentence must still make sense.

Use: 'We arrived at the gig but, because the band wasn't on yet, went to the bar for a beer.'

NOT: 'We arrived at the gig, but because the band wasn't on yet, went to the bar for a beer.'

Further reading:

Many style, usage and grammar books will be able to give you further examples of comma usage. Three books that I recommend for their ease of use and familiar style are below.

Hudson, Nicholas. 1997. *Oxford Modern Australian Usage*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press: Melbourne.

Beazley, M and Marr, G. 2004. *The Writers Handbook*. 2nd Edition. Phoenix Education: Putney NSW.

Commonwealth of Australia. 2002. *Style Manual for authors, editors and printers*. 6th Edition, revised by Snooks & Co. John Wiley & Sons: Canberra.

