



The Fight for the SERIAL COMMA

*Or, How Commas can Save Lives, Reputations, and
Keep Families Intact During the Zombie Apocalypse*

The **COMMA** is a **KEY PLAYER** in the world of grammar.

A well-placed comma can save lives...

Let's eat grandma!



Let's eat, grandma!

or invite the
zombies over for
lunch.

Commas perform many critical functions.

One of these functions is to separate lists of three or more words or phrases.

- Here are a few examples:



- Sally enjoys books, music, the beach, and kittens.



- Bobby has a collection of marbles, comic books, baseball cards, and stamps.

- In order to survive the zombie apocalypse, Kathy hoarded canned goods, bottled water, and fuel.



The SERIAL COMMA is a CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE.

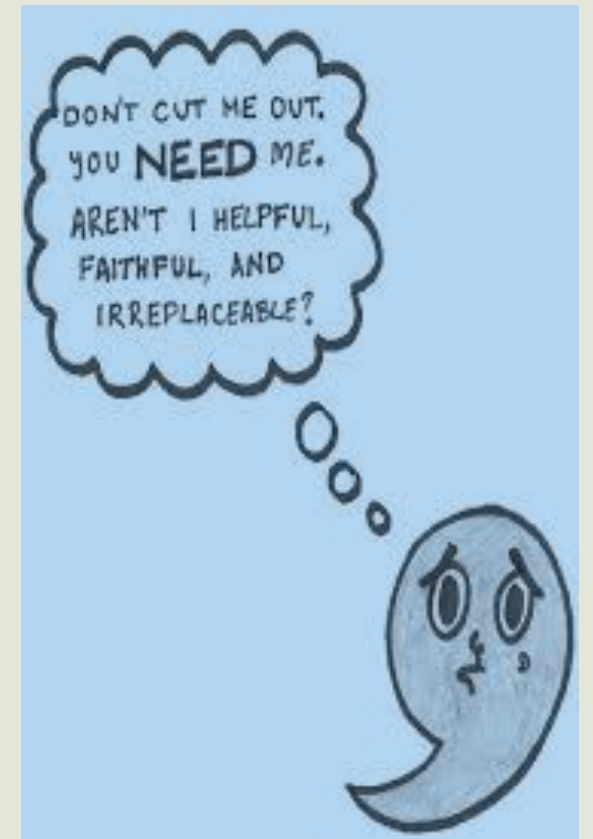
The serial comma, or “Oxford comma,” is the comma placed immediately before the coordinating conjunction (and/or/nor) in the series.

You may have been taught that this final comma is unnecessary. For example, for many grammarians, the following sentence is considered correct:

Sally found that all she longed for since the zombies took over were McDonald’s french fries, clean sheets and television.

Note how there’s no comma after the word “sheets.” The sentence still makes sense and is considered correct.

Sad comma is sad.



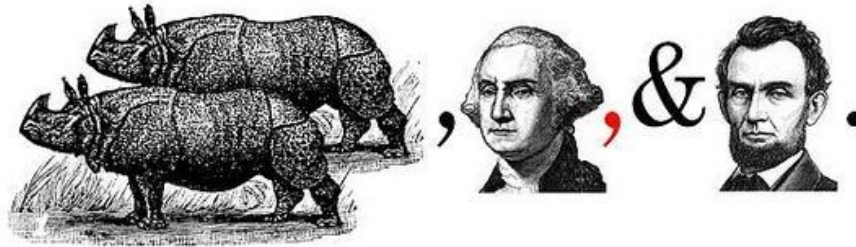
Yet, without the SERIAL COMMA, terrible events may occur.

The SERIAL, or “OXFORD,” comma may help prevent ambiguity or confusion in a sentence.

For example, in this sentence, the use of the Oxford comma prevents the reader from assuming the writer is implying Abraham Lincoln and George Washington were rhinoceri. (FYI, they were not rhinoceri.)

With the **Oxford Comma**:

We invited the rhinoceri, Washington, and Lincoln.



Without the Oxford Comma:

We invited the rhinoceri, Washington and Lincoln.

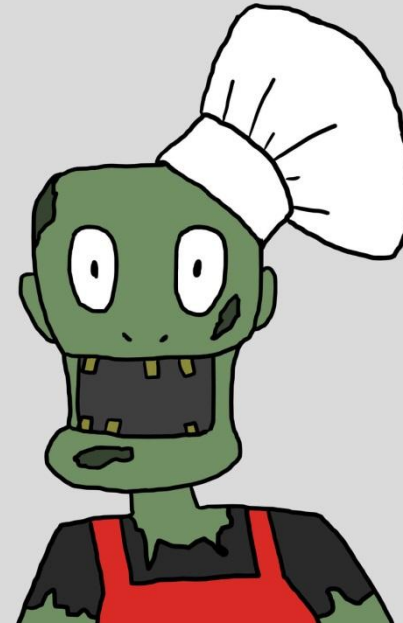


Who knows what kind of chaos could ensue?

Removing the serial or Oxford comma can sometimes lead to a word/phrase appearing to be in apposition to (or defining) the preceding word/phrase. For example, note the following sentence and how adding the serial comma would change the meaning entirely:

For the long journey west, we brought along Sam, a zombie and a cook.

The lack of a serial comma leads the reader to believe that Sam is both a zombie and a cook. Looks like it's going to be brains on the menu, boys!



BUT WAIT! It's not as easy as you think...

Sometimes, by ADDING the serial/Oxford comma, a sentence becomes confusing or ambiguous. Consider the following sentence:

I dedicate this new homestead to the ultimate zombie killer, Justin Bieber, and my mother.


Don't confuse the Biebs.



With the addition of the serial comma, Justin Bieber appears to be identified as the ultimate zombie killer (as he's placed in apposition to that phrase). While the Biebs is undoubtedly excellent at zombie-slaying, the use of the serial comma in this context is misleading if the author intends to dedicate the homestead to three individuals.

This is why there are fierce battles among grammarians.

The war wages on, with one side wanting to banish it entirely...

**BANISH
THE OXFORD
COMMA** 

I miss Pluto, Pogo Sticks
& the Oxford Comma.



*I'll just keep using my comma
and disguise him as an elephant.*

and the other pledging their undying devotion.

Even animals are joining the fight.



It's "handbags COMMA shoes COMMA and stockings."

**You do not
use an
Oxford
Comma!
It's
pointless!**

**Mario and Yoshi
had a little fight...**

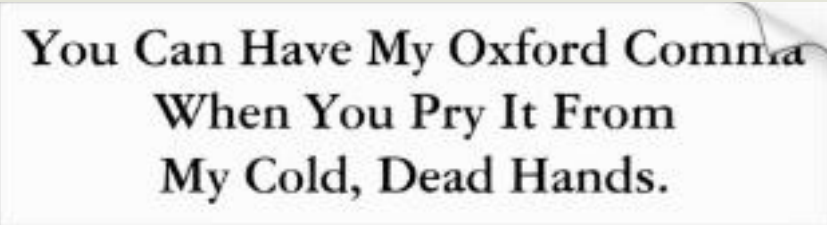
That's why it's up to YOU to decide!

Unlike many hard-and-fast rules in grammar, the serial/Oxford comma depends on context and whether its usage helps or hinders the meaning of the sentence. While some style guides recommend its mandatory use (*Chicago Manual of Style*, *The Elements of Style*, *MLA Style Manual*), others recommend against it (*The AP Stylebook*, *The New York Times stylebook*).



As a writer, YOU have to decide whether to use the comma... or not!

What all style guides agree on is that the use of the serial/Oxford comma depends on how it will affect the sentence's clarity. If it helps clarify the sentence's meaning, then go ahead – use the serial comma! If it's unnecessary or it causes ambiguity, then leave it out!



**You Can Have My Oxford Comma
When You Pry It From
My Cold, Dead Hands.**

*Obviously, some people are a little more
reluctant to relinquish the comma than others...*

Mature writing involves using your own judgment.

Just like you'll need to decide whether your neighbor is still human or has joined the ranks of the undead, you'll have to use your BRAINS (a little zombie humor, there, friends) to decide whether your sentence works best with – or without – the serial/Oxford comma.



*Zombie or just
really creepy?
Your call!*

Try re-writing your sentence to eliminate the problem!

If your sentence is ambiguous regardless of whether you use the serial comma, try re-writing to clarify your meaning.

For example, in the following sentence, it is unclear whether I'm referring to three people or defining my neighbor as a friend:

“When I joined the band of zombie slayers, I left behind my worldly possessions to Bob, a friend, and a singer.”



I guess anything's possible...

Clarity is a writer's first priority! (Besides escaping the undead, of course.)

I might clarify my meaning as follows:

When I joined the band of zombie slayers, I left behind my worldly possessions to Bob, who was a friend and a singer. (This makes it more clear that I'm describing one person).

Or, if I want to convey that I left my belongings to three separate people, then I might re-write as follows:

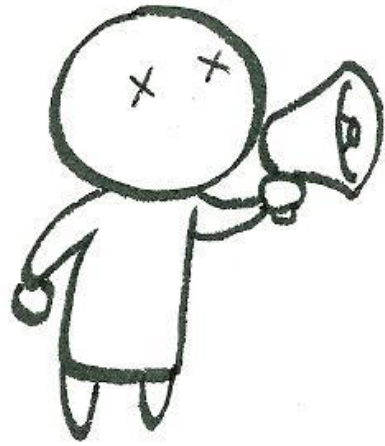
When I joined the band of zombie slayers, I left behind my worldly possessions to a singer, to a friend, and to Bob.



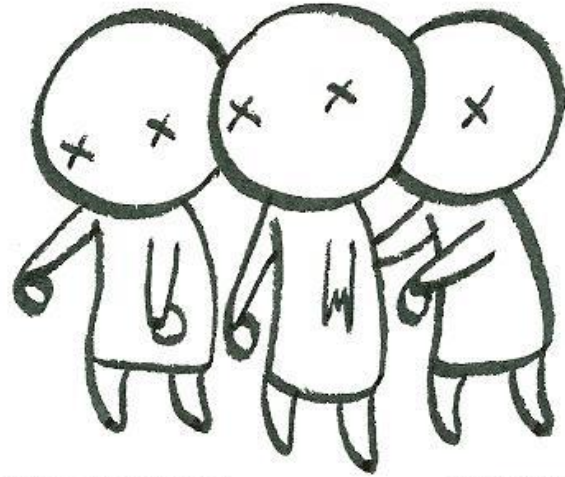
A final word of advice...

Just remember, when there is nothing left in this world save the moaning zombie horde and the gritty band of survivors, GRAMMAR REMAINS. Your judgment regarding punctuation, syntax, and – yes – the Oxford comma might tip the balance in humanity's favor once and for all.

WHAT DO WE WANT?



BRAINS



WHEN DO WE WANT THEM?



BRAINS

