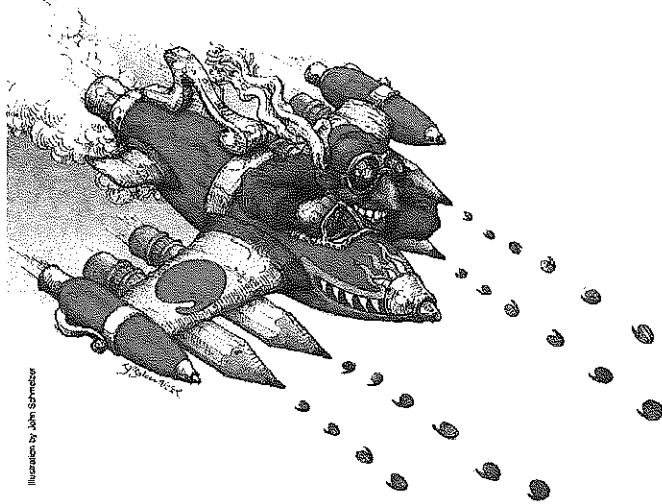


# Commas: The Biggest Little Quirks in the English Language

Andy Gramlich



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## The English Language is Full of Quirks

The English language certainly has some strange quirks that cause endless problems (and opportunities) for aspiring writers, students, and anyone who uses or interprets our written language. Why is it that modern readers of English have difficulty understanding English that was written a few hundred years ago when readers of modern Chinese can easily understand what their ancestors wrote 2000 years ago? How did the basic characteristics of English become its ever-changing nature, constant growth, and rather vague generalities? And how did the lowly little comma become the most misused component of the written language?

Ever wonder why some words that sound the same are spelled differently while words that are spelled the same have different pronunciations and meanings? Consider the following sentences: "I will pare the pair of pears." And "Since there is no time like the present, I decided to present the present." And what kind of logic is used in a language where

girl, curl, and pearl all rhyme, but comb, tomb, and bomb do not?

It is not just a few odd words that cause problems; the way they are grouped together changes their meanings:

Time flies like an arrow.

Fruit flies like an apple.

This is one of the main reasons why computer programs like SpellCheck and GrammarCheck are of such limited help when it comes to written English. These idiosyncrasies of the English language can be enchanting or exasperating, depending on one's perspective. Where else can your house burn up as it burns down, you fill out a form by filling it in, an alarm goes off by going on, and you can ship freight by truck and cargo by ship? And how did priceless come to mean the opposite of worthless when something's fair price is its worth?

The problem is that English is not like math or chemistry; you cannot learn the language by learning the rules that govern its use and then applying them. "Language, unlike matter of the physical universe, does not operate under constant laws" (Perrin & Smith, 1966, p.5). Living languages are evolving systems with more "current conventions" than laws and the current use is the correct use: "...that is, that usage and social acceptance determine correctness" (Webster, 1988, p. xv). And of all languages, English may well be the fastest growing and evolving.

For example, dear English readers, which of the following sentences makes the most sense? (1) "Un violent typhon frappe le Japon: quatre morts." Or (2) "Werodes wisa, wordhord onleac." The first is modern French from an Internet headline (2.canoe, 2003) and the second is Old English from Beowulf, 900 AD (Gorrell & Laird, 1976, p. 275). Puzzled? A translation helps a bit: (1) A violent typhoon whips Japan: four dead, and (2) The leader of the band unlocked the word hoard. Many English readers can sort out an educated guess from the French. Un is near universal for one, violent is a word English has "borrowed" (are we going to give it back?) from the French, typhon is close enough to typhoon, frappe is a setting on a blender—so it has to do with mix or whip, Japon is a foreign spelling of Japan, quatre contains the Latin root of four, and mort the root of death, as in mortal and mortician. The Old English, however, offers no clues to its meaning and even the translation is un-

clear. What is a “word hoard?” Gorrell & Laird (1976) define it as a “vocabulary” so that “unlocked the word hoard” could mean “began to speak.”

Although the Old English of *Beowulf* is decipherable only by experts, Chaucer’s Middle English *Canterbury Tales* also requires a glossary and a grammar guide. The first two lines from *The Canterbury Tales*:

“Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,”

Translation:

“When April with its sweet smelling showers  
Has pierced the drought of March to the root”  
(Benson, 2001).

Even the Early Modern English of Shakespeare is difficult. From *Othello*, only 400 years ago: “Nine, or ten times, I thought to t’haus yerk’d him here vnder the Ribbes.” (Wikipedia, 2003). No translation is offered, but Iago is speaking to Othello about murder and it appears he thought of stabbing someone.

Not only is English constantly changing; it is constantly growing. English speakers readily adopt words from other languages. Everyone knows what a fiancé is but many will stumble on the English betrothed. With well over a million words, English is the largest language on Earth (Webster, 1988). Being a huge and evolving language does not necessarily make the English language a monster. Perhaps the quirks of the language simply reflect the vagrancies of human nature.

### A Brief History of Writing

We all begin speaking before we begin to write and humanity has been speaking far longer than it has been writing. The earliest known examples of actual writing are Sumerian logographs from about 4000 BC. These were simple pictures of objects and symbols representing quantities and time periods. (For tax records!) About 2000 BC, the Phoenicians developed a system of symbols to represent the spoken language, the first alphabet. This alphabet consisted entirely of capitalized consonants and there was no punctuation or even spaces between the words. This sentence would have looked like this: THSSNTNCWLDHVLK-DLKTHS Try and sound that out.

The Greeks added vowels to the alphabet about 1000 BC, making the words much more clear. Although they still had no punctuation or word spacing, this is basically the system we use today and is considered to be one of humanity’s greatest achievements. The Greeks also brought punctuation along about 200 BC, and upper and lower case letters

around 700 AD. What may be the greatest improvement toward ease of use came about 900 AD with the spaces between individual words. Before this innovation, readers had to sound the words out by speaking them aloud, now most could read silently (All dates and facts from Live Ink, 2001). This innovation probably came about not just because of the difficulty in reading, but because of the greater difficulty of teaching students to recognize the individual words in the string of letters.

Word spacing and punctuation certainly have made enormous progress in the understanding of the written language but confusion has also proliferated as more complex ideas could now be written and many people underestimate the power of the lowly comma in altering the meaning of written sentences. Keep in mind this simple example of what commas can do: “Kitty claimed Puppy made the puddle” and “Kitty, claimed Puppy, made the puddle.” The meaning of the sentences is reversed by a couple of commas. This has led to the widespread advice of “When in doubt, leave them out” because many college students tend to use too many commas rather than too few, perhaps because they think it makes their writing look more academic or shows their deep, complex thinking.

### The Problem With Commas

Yes, commas reign supreme in creating confusion as they rain down upon the written word although attempts to rein them in are having some effect. The trend today is toward less commas and other punctuation, especially in newsprint. In *Punctuate It Right!*, Harry Shaw cites a study that counted the punctuation marks in 100 consecutive sentences in newspapers and magazines. The study found that in the *New York Times* of 1851, 195 commas appeared in 100 consecutive sentences. A hundred and ten years later, in 1961, 125 commas appeared. Similar numbers appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*: 175 commas per 100 sentences in 1851 and 118 in 1961 (Shaw, 1963). This is a considerable reduction and is not caused by some bias against commas, but by the realization of editors and careful writers that sentences requiring considerable internal punctuation are overly complex and simply should be rephrased. This is common advice for comma problems.

But before you dispense with commas altogether, however, remember that commas are required for clarity. This need for clarity is especially necessary in legal documents such as warranties. Consider the plight of the high-rise building owner with a broken elevator. The elevator warranty read: “This company

shall repair or replace worm and gear bearings and housings." It was the worm and gear that wore out, not their bearings or housings. His attorney ruefully explained that he should have signed a contract that read: "This company will repair or replace worm and gear, bearings and housings" (Romm, 1984). The owner was responsible for thousands of dollars in repair costs plus attorney's fees, all because of a missing little comma.

More important issues than money can hinge on a misplaced comma. Michigan recently discovered that its state constitution inadvertently legalized slavery. Section 8, Article 2, read: "Neither slavery or involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of a crime, shall ever be tolerated in this state". Technically, this says slavery will be tolerated for the punishment of a crime. It was decided to move the comma from after servitude and place it after slavery (Bernstein, 1965 p. 360). Bernstein offers another example of how a comma can change the meaning of a sentence:

- A) What's the latest dope? (dope equals information)
- B) What's the latest, dope? (, dope equals you, dummy) (Bernstein, 1965, p. 360).

So what is the average college writer to do? Most of us are not English majors and do not know appositives and gerunds from a hole in the ground. Still, we want to present our ideas and conclusions in the numerous reports and papers we are required to write with as much clarity and readability as possible. Forget about trying to find a simple and complete rule list; there isn't one. And the rulebooks? Take note, they are called *stylebooks*. The many "conventions" have so many exceptions that they can barely even be called precedents. What may be the king of all the stylebooks, the University of Chicago's *A Manual of Style*, states in the preface: "Throughout this book it is assumed that no regulation contained herein is absolutely inviolable" (*A Manual of Style*, 1972, p. viii). And Purdue University's Online Writing Lab states in the first paragraph on using commas: "...however, in certain rhetorical contexts and for specific purposes, these rules may be broken" (OWL, 2003). The Chicago Manual of Style, as it is often called, continues with "...the use of the comma is mainly a matter of good judgment with the ease of reading as the end in view" (*A Manual of Style*, 1972, p. 108). "Good judgment," where does one learn that? Sir Ernest Gowers, a foremost British authority on *style*, wrote in *The Complete Plain Words* (London: Her Majesties Stationery Office, 1954), "The correct use of the comma—if there is such a thing as correct use—can only be acquired by commonsense, observation and taste" (Baskette & Sissors, 1971 p. 407). It seems fittingly ironic for a couple of

fellows almost named Scissors and Basket to write a book called *The Art of Editing*.

The problem of identifying the conventional use gets more complicated the more you look into it. Which is the "correct conventional" use of commas here?

The flag is red, white and blue.

The flag is red, white, and blue.

Puzzled? No wonder, for both are correct and conventional (Bernstein, 1965). It's just a matter of *STYLE*, and in this case, newspaper or literary (book) style. This type of comma is known as the serial comma and beware, for the serial comma stalks the grammar community. Choose one style or the other the authorities say, but be consistent. Most writers recommend the literary style in college writing to avoid possible confusion and say it is never wrong to include the last comma before a conjunction in a list. Look at this example: "I dedicate this book to my parents, Ayn Rand and God." Here, omitting the final comma suggests that the last two items are a special pair (an appositive for parents) (Lynch, 2001). The serial comma problem becomes more evident in this example: "We have several positions available: copywriter, ad executive, receptionist and typist." How many positions are available? As it is written, it could be either three or four, depending on whether or not the receptionist is also the typist. If there are four open positions, a comma between receptionist and typist makes this clear. Commas are for clarity.

So how did commas become the most misused punctuation mark? Joseph Sigalas, an English professor, says, "The reasons are many, but come down to two:

1. The first is the misconception that the only reason we use commas is to signal the reader to pause.
2. The second is the idea that there is something like 383 rules governing commas, each more arbitrary than the next. There's no point in trying to master them all, so refer to rule #1" (Sigalas, 2001).

The comma as pause can be a useful rule of thumb, but different people pause for different reasons in different places. Consider the first line from President Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln wrote this as a speech he was to give before an audience and probably inserted the commas where he wanted to pause for effect. However, "...all three of the commas appearing in the first sentence might be removed by current copy edi-

tors and experienced writers" (Shaw, 1963, p. 13). The comma as pause rule also fails in long sentences that grammatically do not call for commas even though a speaker could not recite the sentence without gasping for breath. This 57-word sentence is grammatically correct: "The manner in which their grandfather began the tremendous task of giving away substantial parts of the world's greatest fortune and the way in which their father expanded the business of philanthropy had a significant role in guiding the five brothers into new ventures intended to make the world a better place in which to live. —Joe Allen Morris, *Those Rockefeller Brothers* p.133" (Perrin & Smith, 1962, p. 155). Comma use can also be optional, as in this example offered by highly respected editor and English professor Harry Shaw: "Every comma in the following can be justified, but every comma could equally be omitted since clarity is not affected in the slightest degree: After the play, Martha and I went home, by taxicab, because we wanted, at all costs, to avoid subway crowds" (Shaw, 1963, p. 76).

So keep them in or throw the little buggers out? Tread carefully here, for commas can change the meaning of a sentence in dramatic (reverse) or in very subtle ways. All three of the following sentences are correct, and all three have slightly different meanings:

1. Her brief yet eloquent tribute appears in this month's journal.
2. Her brief, yet eloquent tribute appears in this month's journal.
3. Her brief, yet eloquent, tribute appears in this month's journal. (Einsoln, 2000).

The differences in meaning are subtle, yet give varied expression to the author's "voice," and are what differentiate correct writing from great writing. The first is the least expressive and gives equal stress to brief and eloquent. The second is more expressive; it emphasizes the contrast between brief and eloquent. The third is the most expressive; calling attention to the contrast while emphasizing "yet eloquent" by separating it with commas from the rest of the sentence.

Some writers get excited about commas and their misuse and one may have discovered a basic cause of widespread punctuation and grammar errors. David Gagne runs an extensive website that covers many problems in communication and writing. Lately he posted a selection of metaphors and analogies from high school essays that is hilarious. Some examples:

The ballerina rose gracefully en pointe and extended one slender leg behind her, like a dog at a fire hydrant.

She walked into my office like a centipede with 98 missing legs.

It hurt the way your tongue hurts after you accidentally staple it to the wall. (Gagne, 2003).

But when it comes to commas, Gagne stops laughing and rails against the educational system and the complacency of human nature that seem to say "Who cares?" He cares, and gets particularly excited about the correct use of commas when ending lists, such as the red, white, and blue problem. He states that punctuation marks are the equivalent of logical operators in mathematics such as +, x, and (). As an example, he offers a list of five people: Jim, John, Jack, Jeff and Jeremy. He says commas are required to separate each name in the list and as it is written, Jeff and Jeremy is one item. So what? Reconsider the problem of combining the last two items in the example "To my parents, Ayn Rand and God." Gagne says this would be important to Jeff and Jeremy if this was a list of who was to receive an extra \$100 in their paycheck: The first three would each get \$100 while Jeff and Jeremy would share \$100 (Gagne, 2002).

What is most interesting is the conclusion Gagne reaches when searching for the cause of this confusion. He believes it is because humans are so intelligent that our brains overlook errors and inconsistencies to readily change nonsense into sense: "Our brains convert the idiotic drivel flowing from each other's mouths into sensible thoughts without even letting us know it's happening!" (Gagne, 2002). This explains the advice offered by many editors that no writer, however gifted, should edit their own work because they will see what they meant and not what they wrote.

So if we are so smart, why can't we come up with a useful comma guide? Actually, they are out there. The stylebooks are very good, with endless examples, if you are familiar with the jargon and know what an introductory participle phrase is and can tell when a dependent clause is restrictive or not. Some online resources are less intimidating such as the Online Writing Lab (OWL) maintained by Purdue University (OWL, 2003). This extensive site covers everything you may want to know about writing although it is easy to get lost in its many corridors. For a "Cliff Notes" abbreviated type of site focused on commas try "Commas: They're Not Just for English Majors Anymore" (Sigalas, 2001).

Perhaps the best thing to do is to remember what commas do: They separate parts of a sentence. The word comma comes from the Greek "komma," the root of which is "kloptein," which means "to cut off" (Shaw, 1963). You should be able to justify all the commas you use, they are not just for decoration and they can change the meaning of your sentences.

Here is a short list of where commas are needed with examples taken from Joseph Sigalas' (2001) web-site:

- With introductory elements that orient the reader or set up the sentence like "Before she went insane, she taught English composition at the University of Georgia." They may be only one word, as in "Therefore, she never was truly sane." Leaving out this comma is said to be the number one sentence-level error college students make.
- When you wish to show contrast between parts of the sentence as in "We throw fish at college professors, not at respectable people."
- When you are joining two independent clauses (each could be a complete sentence alone) and are using one of the coordinating conjunctions often referred to as FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So) to build a compound sentence like "Beatrice's hair started smoking during dinner, and it later burst into flames." Note that using the comma alone results in the dreaded comma splice.
- When using coordinate (equal) adjectives as in "We eyed the rotten, wormy tomatoes with delight." To tell if they are equal, change the order or insert the word "and" between them. If the sentence still makes sense, use a comma between them.
- Use a pair of commas with non-essential elements that supply additional information that could be placed in parenthesis or deleted without altering the meaning of the sentence as in "The poem, written in some language I couldn't understand, made me want to throw the book away."

That short list covers many of the places commas pop up or should pop up, but there are numerous other places these little quirks appear in our writing. Some of the quirkiest:

- A comma can replace a repeated word or phrase that is omitted such as "Monday we will study commas and Tuesday, semicolons."
- Commas are used to indicate direct address, as in "What's the latest, dope?"
- Commas may be necessary to prevent the reader from mistakenly joining words or phrases that are separate: "To George (,) Washington was home" or "While we eating (,) a diseased rodent approached our table."
- Commas are usually used to separate two identical words in a sentence: "Whatever is, is good." And "Let us march in, in twos." *But not always:*

"He gave his life that that cause might prevail" (A Manual of Style 1972, p. 115).

That *but not always* clause increases exponentially in other places commas are used, as in introducing quotations. Commas are often used to introduce quotations such as he said, she said, followed by a quotation *except* when the quotation is long or formal (then use a colon), or when the quotation is an incomplete phrase that is an essential part of the sentence like "She said 'Goodbye' and walked away," *except* when you want to slow down the action for effect. From here you need to follow Sir Ernest Gowers, who cautioned us "The correct use of the comma—if there is such a thing as correct use—can only be acquired by commonsense, observation, and taste" (Baskette & Sissors, 1971. p. 108).

Not to worry too much though, for we are so intelligent that we can make sense of each other's writing without commonsense, observation, and taste when we come upon a quagmire like this in our research: "PROPOSITION 1.26. If two triangles have the two angles equal to two angles respectively, and one side equal to one side, namely, either the side adjoining the equal angles, or that subtending one of the equal angles, they will also have the remaining sides equal to the remaining sides and the remaining angle equal to the remaining angle" (IEP, 2001). Try and edit that! This famous mathematical theorem (proof) is attributed to Thales, the first math whiz from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC whose grasp of geometry was far greater than his (or his translator's) use of the language.

Perhaps this triangular "proof" could be the basis of a rule for commas: If you have three or more commas in a sentence, reflect for a moment and then rewrite the sentence. But take all English rules with the proverbial grain of salt, because they may be wrong. Remember the old singsong from elementary school? I before E except after C? Is it not weird that their rule does not apply to science?

*Editor's Note: This is a research paper written for English 299.*

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