Commas Here, Commas There, Commas Everywhere!

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In this article, Scharlau investigates how, and for what types of writing styles, commas are used. Using information from *Grammatically Correct* by Anne Stilman, Scharlau demonstrates features of commas from some of her own writing.

In an English class I took during my first semester at Illinois State University, I was required to read Anne Stilman's *Grammatically Correct.* After thirteen years of schooling, one probably believes that he or she is required to follow grammar rules regardless of the style of writing. This isn't always the case though; it depends on the genre. But for those times the rules need to be followed, Stilman helped me understand what the standards are. As I was reading through Stilman's book, I found myself "huh"-ing in just about every chapter. But I was particularly intrigued by the section on commas.

I soon realized I may not be the only one out there that doesn't know some key factors regarding comma use. But once I started paying attention to commas, I realized that many people don't follow Stilman's guidelines. To start off the chapter, Stilman says, "The comma is the most-used punctuation mark, typically outnumbering all the others put together" (77). Surprising, I know! (I always thought it would be the period.) Commas are used when separating the main elements of a sentence from each other, separating elements in a series, using *which* but not *that*, and separating a parenthetical element within an independent clause (77). Stilman covers all these topics

and more in twenty-two pages. My goal in this article is to help other writers quickly learn these simple rules so that they can use them in certain genres of their choosing. To demonstrate these rules, I use examples from writing completed by my fellow students in an English class. The assignment asked us to interview another classmate and write a short biography on them. My professor expected the class to follow standard grammar rules. After reviewing these rules, I will briefly discuss how these rules may or may not be used in different genres of writing.

Separating the Main Elements

The first rule for commas is separating the main elements of a sentence from each other (Stilman 78). According to Stilman, some commas need to be added or placed after different words in the following examples from my peers' writing:

> *Sentence 1:* She's a freshman here at Illinois State, and is majoring in English Education.
>
> *Sentence 2:* In order to help her reach her goal of becoming a successful educator she is enrolled in the following classes, English 100, English 102, Communication 110, Chemistry, and Spanish.
>
> *Sentence 3:* It's a bit of a doozy, but he'll make it as long as he has sporadic events to keep him on his toes [. . .].
>
> *Sentence 4:* Therefore, he changed his major to English where he could teach the students but also be there for them to come to when they needed someone to talk to.

Stilman explains that the "**predicate** gives some information about the subject, either describing a characteristic it possesses or identifying an action that it performs of that is preformed upon."

Sentence 1 strays from the rule, "Don't split two descriptions in a predicate. […]" (79). Stilman explains that "When a string of words focuses on a single idea or on closely related ideas, it should be treated as an indivisible unit and not be broken up" (78). The word *she* is the noun, or subject, of the sentence and the rest is the predicate describing the subject. The author of this sentence split two descriptive phrases describing the same subject. Because of this, the words *is majoring in English Education* are left describing nothing. The comma separates the two descriptions, making it unclear who or what is majoring in English Education. The version that follows the rule would read, "She's a freshman here at Illinois State and is majoring in English Education."

Stilman advises, "Use a colon to introduce a list or series."

Sentence 2 should read, "In order to help her reach her goal of becoming a successful educator she is enrolled in the following classes: English 100[…]." The comma that comes after *following classes* is considered incorrect

by Stilman's book because it makes it seem as if it were an item in the list of classes the student is taking. The colon distinguishes the classes that the student is taking.

Sentence 3 adheres to the rule, "Use a comma to separate the two independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction" (Stilman 80). The words *and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, *nor*, *yet*, and *so* are coordinating conjunctions. The underlined parts in sentence 3 are two separate independent clauses that are joined by the word *but* so the comma goes before the conjunction.

In sentence 4, the comma is also agreeing to the comma rules. Stilman explains that the comma provides a clear division between an independent clause and some element that comes before it (82). In this case, the word *therefore* is the element that comes before the independent clause. The sentence would work just as well without the *therefore*, but it adds a transition to the sentence.

Separating Elements in a Series

When it comes to the separation of elements in a series, there are certain instances where a comma is used. A serial comma is a comma that comes after the second-to-last item in a series (Stilman 93). Stilman says it's the author's choice whether to use a serial comma, or not as long as the sentence makes sense, which can be illustrated in the following sentences:

Series is "a group or a number of related or similar things, events, etc., arranged or occurring in temporal, spatial, or other order or succession; sequence."

> *Sentence 1:* Molly describes herself as protective, determined and spontaneous.
>
> *Sentence 2:* She is currently enrolled in two English classes, Communications, a geology course, American Diversity, and University Band.
>
> *Sentence 3:* Her young, inspiring teacher taught her that she can achieve anything.

A serial comma is not necessary in sentence 1, but if one were to be inserted, it would follow the word *determined*. In sentence 2, a serial comma is used following the word *diversity*, and without it, readers may be confused. If the sentence read, "She is currently enrolled in two English classes, Communications, a geology course, American Diversity and University Band," one may think that the author is calling the band "American Diversity and University."

In sentence 3, a serial comma is not used, nor can it be used, but it still falls under the category of the separation of elements in a series. Stilman

writes, "You do, however, need to separate two items when those items are adjectives and modifying a noun" (95). In the case of sentence 3, without the comma separating young and inspiring, one may read the sentence as *young inspiring* and a *teacher*; meaning that person inspired young people and also taught students. See the confusion? Because the sentence has the comma between *young* and *inspiring*, it can be presumed that the teacher is young and inspiring. I know, this can get a little confusing, and the rules have exceptions. So let's move on to some things that may be more straightforward.

Using *Which* or *That*

One clear-cut rule Stilman writes in this chapter is "*which* takes a comma, *that* does not" (93). What does this mean? (I know, I may have just contradicted myself by quoting that rule, but the comma was necessary there.) Look over the following two sentences and see if you can catch what the rule is explaining:

> *Sentence 1:* Quinn enjoys drawing and painting, which are two of his most favorite hobbies.
>
> *Sentence 2:* She wants to work for the music company that has gained a positive reputation for women's rights.

Did you catch the comma used before *which*, but no comma used before *that*? Why is this? The word *which* in the first sentence is used to describe drawing and painting, almost as if it is a side note. The word *that* in the second sentence is used to tell what company the woman wants to work for. The difference is *which* describes and *that* clarifies. But to make it easy on yourself, remember that "*which* takes a comma, *that* does not."

Parenthetical Commas

A parenthetical element is "text that is not critical to the basic structure of the sentence; it interrupts the flow but does not interfere with the meaning."

Another simple rule to follow is that parenthetical commas always come in pairs, just as parentheses do (Stilman 88). Parenthetical commas are used to separate a parenthetical element from the rest of the sentence (Stilman 87). Take a look at the following sentences (here, one sentence has been altered to make it two different sentences):

> *Sentence 1:* His friend, says Victor, is the support system in his life.
>
> *Sentence 2:* His friend says Victor is the support system in his life.

In the first sentence, *says Victor* is in between two commas. This is an example of a parenthetical element surrounded by parenthetical commas. *Says Victor* can be removed and the sentence will still have the same effect: His friend is the support system in his life. Taking a look at sentence 2, the sentence has a different effect than the first one: Victor's friend says that Victor is the support system in his life. The sentence reads differently because the commas are not in place. Understand the importance yet? The purpose of the parenthetical element and the parenthetical commas is to add some more information that may or may not be of importance to the rest of the sentence (Stilman 86). Finally, remember that parenthetical commas are just like parentheses when it comes to pairs—without the other comma, the sentence would be unfinished.

Parenthetical elements can also be surrounded by parentheses or em-dashes (—), depending on the sentence.

Probably the Only Time You Can Be a Rule-Breaker

I hope that this review will help other writers understand commas; however, the use of these rules varies from genre to genre. For example, would you triple check your latest tweet to make sure you put the punctuation in the places Stilman would advise you to? Or, in a cover letters for a job application, would you leave out the comma after *Normal*, before *Illinois* in your return address? As an author, you decide when you would or wouldn't use punctuation. But in order to be a rule-breaker, it helps to know the rules before you break them. When you're debating on what is considered an "appropriate" time to follow Stilman's punctuation rules, think about who your audience is and what their expectations are. Take, for example, the sentences used in this essay: my professor expected the class to put commas where today's grammar handbooks would recommend. But then think about your last post on your friend's Facebook wall. Did you make sure to put commas in where those handbooks would deem necessary? Chances are, you didn't care and neither did your friend.

What's considered "correct" and "incorrect" all depends on your audience's expectations. It is likely that you will follow Stilman's grammar rules when it comes to resumes, works submitted for publication, e-mails to your English professor, and so forth. If you're applying for a job and you're using run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and forgetting to capitalize the first letter of every sentence, chances are the people reviewing your resume are going to toss it in the trash. They are probably going through hundreds of resumes and narrowing them down based on grammar structure. They might figure that if you don't take the time to go back and fix those mistakes, you would not go back and fix your mistakes on the job. Thus, situations

where your reader is going to look at your punctuation usage and base your credibility off of that are times when I would advise that you follow Stilman's rules. I also recommend that you use commas if the meaning would otherwise be unclear. But feel free to stray away from those rules when the purpose of the communication is for entertainment, as a part of a conversation, or something else.

In closing, I want to discuss an example where punctuation is used as a signal. Consider this line from the popular book *Hunger Games*:

> "District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety" (Collins 6).

According to Stilman, these two sentences are not complete sentences. There is not a verb in the first sentence. There is a subordinating conjunction, *where*, in the second sentence, which is not followed by a main clause. But I assume that this sentence reads exactly as Suzanne Collins wants it to. It creates emphasis and makes the reader read it slowly. Collins thus shows that writers can break the rules if they find it useful. Other sentences in her book show that she knows how to use punctuation the way Stilman explains, such as the following:

> "After the reaping, everyone is supposed to celebrate" (Collins 10).

The word *after* is a subordinating conjunction as well. The difference here is that there is a main clause attached to it: *everyone is supposed to celebrate*. Collins knows the grammar rules, but chooses to break them when she finds it useful. As writers, we all can make similar decisions.

It sounds like I am contradicting myself by explaining grammar rules about commas and then showing how to break them, but the point is that rules depend on the specific writing situation. We can better expand our talents as writers when we choose when and when not to use certain punctuation conventions. Sometimes rules are broken in order to get the intended meaning across or to emphasize something. Other times, rules are followed to meet the expectations of the audience. Based on these expectations and the genre you're writing in, you as an author should decide what's best for your use.

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