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The Serial Comma: Sentence Killer or Content Savior?

by

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Some years ago, in a rented office suite replete with stale doughnuts and overly acidic coffee, the precursors of modern business consultancy made a decision of monumental consequence. These self-proclaimed arbiters of corporate format made the startling decree that punctuation was a bad thing. "Get to the point!" they announced. "Keep it simple. Use ad copy style in everything you write and say."

This ill-advised counsel led to a quixotic quicksand of confusion. Whereas 'tis true that at one time commas were sprinkled generously to imply importance, their removal creates an even larger problem. This is particularly the case in sentences containing serial phrases.

We live in a mergers and acquisitions, profit and loss, and movers and shakers world. Conglomerate words abound, and without the mighty serial comma to keep things clear, sentences become jumbles of grouped mayhem.

In a false sense of economy, it was reasoned that the "and" in a serial phrase needed no preceding comma. However, a comma is no mere squiggle of ink to be cast aside on whim. It is the visual equivalent of a pause in speech, and clarity is its concern.

Try reading this sentence:

She studied communications and marketing, audio and video and transmission and broadcast theories.

Without the serial comma, the example could have numerous meanings. The person could have studied about the following subjects:

1. Communications and marketing theories
2. Audio and video theories

3. Transmission and broadcast theories

or

1. Communications and marketing
2. Audio
3. Video
4. Transmission and broadcast theories

or

1. Communications
2. Marketing, audio and video, and transmission and broadcast theories

Rather than being a tautological redundancy, the serial comma is a clarifying necessity. Incorrect interpretation can be eliminated by using this wonderful tool, which allows the sentence to read as follows:

She studied communications and marketing, audio and video, and transmission and broadcast theories.

It is thus obvious which words join to form grouped phrases. (A further rewrite would restructure the placement of "theories" to make its reference clear, but that's another story.)

So let me suggest that henceforth we use the serial comma at all times. We'll each read a little more easily, thoroughly, and thoughtfully as a result.



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