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Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



## Comma chameleon



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World got you down?

You've had enough of intractable disagreements about politics, borders, taxes, the environment, education, religion, inflation, left or right, aisle or window? You're disappointed that people spend an inordinate amount of time worrying

about whether a pop musician can leave Japan in time to see her boyfriend play in a football game?

Then let's point the Spotlight of Substance at something that is overlooked. Something that matters.

The comma.

But not just any comma. The Oxford comma.

Don't go there, you say, because society doesn't need another argument that separates us. How can punctuation matter when a billionaire singer might not get to see her millionaire beau catch a football?

I encourage use of the Oxford comma, but I make no demands. Do what you will. Split an infinitive while you're at it. But learn from me—feckless youth and occupational demands can obscure the Oxford comma's principal benefit: Add a comma, get precision.

The Oxford comma usually curves its way through the world unnoticed, but it generates exuberant interest among editing freaks. This surprises you? As you know, the Oxford term refers to the comma that precedes a conjunction at the end of a list of things in a sentence, as in:

He bought milk, bread, and artichokes.

Some would ask what precision that squiggle confers. The sentence is understandable without a comma after bread. True, but certain sentences cry out for a comma.

Michael invited his parents, Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce.

Michael is invited to use the Oxford comma unless his parents are Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce. Embrace the light and avoid ambiguity. You could rewrite the sentence, but then you might veer into wordiness, another reader obstacle.

Disagreements about Oxford comma use are plentiful and long-running. Some even find the name disagreeable. In the entertaining *Dreyer's English*, editing wizard Benjamin Dreyer writes that Oxford University professors who supposedly did the naming actually had nothing to do with it. He rejects a substitute term, serial comma, explaining that serial has become a tainted adjective, given its frequent modification of killer. Dreyer says series comma is better.

Confusion about whether an Oxford/series comma should be employed might stem from its uneven usage in the publishing world. Publications typically choose one style guide, such as *The Associated Press Stylebook* (newspapers) or *The Chicago Manual of Style* (novels and much nonfiction) and require their writers to follow that guide's rules. The AP says no to the Oxford comma. Chicago says yes. When you fold and set down the day's newspaper (for younger readers, a newspaper consists of thin layers of wood pulp with letters and images produced on a printing press) and open a book (smaller, bound pieces of thin wood pulp also produced on a printing press, which is a loud, large machine, usually steel, with rollers and plates that can be configured to transfer red, yellow, blue, and black ink in various proportions to the wood pulp in recognizable forms) you are confronted with an abrupt switch in comma rules. The world is so messy. Different rules for different people invite chaos.

Editors who spend the bulk of their careers in newspaper work often revere the AP stylebook and enforce its rules with zealous glee. They can quote AP passages: OK and OK'd, not okay and okayed; toward and backward, not towards and backwards; the difference between convince and persuade; and more than 500 additional pages for those who prefer their style guides on paper. Those few times when an experienced newspaper writer uses an Oxford comma, these newspaper editors grind it to digital dust, their twisted smiles alarming those who sit near them.

Any editor charged with assuring that a written work is safe for human consumption would tell you that enforcement of comma rules is barely a blip in the work of advising writers, improving their work, and occasionally talking them down from an authorial ledge of their own design. Still, there must be rules, although any editor would tell you there is, there are, and assorted syntactical siblings are weak ways to begin a sentence or clause. And even editors can evolve.

When I began to focus on books, I came to appreciate *The Chicago Manual of Style's* calm, unflinching support of the Oxford/serial/series comma. My newspaper colleagues consider this the act of a turncoat or savage. But that comma clarified sentences, and free of the AP's yoke, I understood what the mythical Oxford dons had done for coherent communication. Faith burns brightly in the soul of the convert.

I deputize you. Clear expression needs more help, and the Oxford comma is a start. The path will be difficult, but you will have free moments. You can even take time on Sunday to watch a garish cultural event, Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce.

Ummmm . . .

You can watch a garish cultural event, Taylor Swift, and Travis Kelce.

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**Kind regards**  
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February 2024



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