Mistakes with commas

No discussion about the most common mistakes in English would be complete without mentioning commas. Although not using commas properly would not make you *sound* unnatural (as it is a purely typographical device), it would make your writing look substandard or even cause misunderstanding.

Comma before a dependent clause

What sets English apart from most other languages is its use of comma before a dependent (subordinate) clause. Dependent clauses (clauses introduced by words like “that”, “which”, “who”, “where”, “how”, etc.) are **neither preceded nor followed by a comma**. For example:

> *Cars that don’t have seat belts aren’t allowed to carry children. (cor.)*
> *Cars, that don’t have seat belts, aren’t allowed to carry children. (w.)*
>
> *I don’t know which one I want. (correct)*
> *I don’t know, which one I want. (wrong)*
>
> *Could you tell me where it is? (correct)*
> *Could you tell me, where it is? (wrong)*

Dependent clauses are separated with commas only when the information contained in the clause is not important for the overall meaning of the whole sentence. A good way to recognize such

clauses is to try to enclose the clause in parentheses; if the sentence still makes sense, you should use commas (or parentheses) to separate the clause from the rest, e.g.

> *Brazil nuts, which you can buy in a supermarket,*
> *are a great source of selenium.*

Commas were appropriate here because we could replace them with parentheses:

> *Brazil nuts (which you can buy in a supermarket) are a great source of selenium.*

Not using commas or parentheses would be a mistake in this case. The sentence

> *Brazil nuts which you can buy in a supermarket are a great source of selenium.*

implies that only Brazil nuts sold in a supermarket are a great source of selenium, which is certainly not the case.

Notice how the three examples we used at the beginning wouldn't make sense if we put the dependent clause in parentheses:

> *Cars (that don't have seat belts) aren't allowed to carry children.*
> *I don't know (which one I want).*
> *Could you tell me (where it is)?*

Comma before conjunctions between independent clauses

Most languages don't require a comma before "and" when it joins two independent clauses, but writing a comma before "but", "so", and other conjunctions is quite common. In English, however, we don't

make a difference between “and” and other conjunctions, and you should almost always use a comma:

> *I had to go to the airport, and/but/so I couldn’t attend the party. (co.)*
> *I had to go to the airport and/but/so I couldn’t attend the party. (wr.)*
>
> *She’s already seen the film, and she doesn’t want to go. (correct)*
> *She’s already seen the film and she doesn’t want to go. (wrong)*

I wrote “almost always” because it is usually considered acceptable to omit the comma when both clauses are very short, e.g.

> *I played the guitar and she sang. (acceptable)*
> *I played the guitar, and she sang. (correct)*

The solution seems to be simple: just write the comma every time, and you cannot be wrong. But, there is a catch. When “and”, “but”, and other conjunctions separate just two verbs, not two clauses, we don’t use a comma, for example:

> *He cooks and eats. (correct)*
> *He cooks, and eats. (wrong)*
>
> *He can ride a bike but can’t swim. (correct)*
> *He can ride a bike, but can’t swim. (wrong)*

The problem is that you can make the sentence any length you wish; as long as there is no subject in the other “clause”, you shouldn’t use a comma:

> *He cooks meals for the whole family and eats a lot of vegetables. (cor.)*
> *He cooks meals for the whole family, and eats a lot of vegetables. (wr.)*

Theoretically, you could avoid this situation by always putting the subject in each part of the sentence, but this can hardly be recommended; you will certainly agree the following sentence sounds a bit clumsy:

> *He cooks meals for the whole family, and he eats a lot of vegetables.*

The sentence is grammatically correct, but the one without “he” and the comma sounds much more natural.

Comma between independent clauses

It is perfectly fine to separate two sentences by a comma in most European languages. In English, however, this is considered a mistake; you either have to use a full stop (period), a semicolon (like I did in this sentence), or you have to use a conjunction (a word like “and”, “but”, “whereas”, etc.):

> *Jane went to the cinema. John went home. (correct)*
> *Jane went to the cinema; John went home. (correct)*
> *Jane went to the cinema, and John went home. (correct)*
> *Jane went to the cinema, John went home. (wrong)*

We use a semicolon especially when there is some logical connection between the two clauses (i.e. when we don’t use a conjunction, but the sentence doesn’t look quite right with a full stop), for example:

> *I moved to Japan; I want to stay there. (correct)*
> *I moved to Japan, and I want to stay there. (correct)*
> *I moved to Japan. I want to stay there. (somewhat fragmented)*
> *I moved to Japan, I want to stay there. (wrong)*

The third example is grammatically correct, but the style is somewhat inappropriate. Too many short sentences may make your writing look childish or non-native.

Moreover, if the latter clause/sentence is introduced by an adverb like “moreover”, “nevertheless”, “however”, etc., you should use a full stop or a semicolon:

> *I moved to Japan. Moreover, I intend to stay there. (correct)*
> *I moved to Japan, moreover, I intend to stay there. (wrong)*
>
> *Jane went to the cinema; however, John went home. (correct)*
> *Jane went to the cinema, however, John went home. (wrong)*

Don't confuse this usage with such adverbs modifying the *first* clause, as in:

> *I was originally thinking about moving to China. I moved to Japan, however, and I intend to stay there.*

"However" belongs to the first clause, not to the second; we could as well have said "However, I moved to Japan, and I intend to stay there."

Comma after introductory phrase

After an introductory phrase, you should usually write a comma. I intentionally started the last sentence with an introductory phrase to demonstrate what an introductory phrase is: it is a part of sentence that would normally come after a verb (without any comma). If you break the natural flow, you should indicate it with a comma:

> *After an introductory phrase, you should write a comma. (correct)*
> *You should write a comma after an introductory phrase. (correct)*
> *After an introductory phrase you should write a comma. (wrong)*
>
> *Before moving any further, let us introduce a few concepts. (correct)*
> *Before moving any further let us introduce a few concepts. (wrong)*

If you feel the flow of the sentence would be harmed by including a comma (which indicates a short pause), you may omit it. Such usage

should be limited to short adverbial phrases indicating time, place, or manner, for example:

> *Yesterday I saw him.*
> *With gratitude he accepted the prize.*

Nonetheless, writing a comma in these sentences would be also considered completely correct.

Whether you use a comma or not, *don't overuse introductory phrases*. I've seen many texts (especially in scientific writing) written by non-native speakers in which almost every other sentence started with an introductory phrase. It is fine to use an introductory phrase every now and then to emphasize a certain part of the sentence, but this is not the normal way to construct sentences are in English. "I saw him yesterday." is the normal way. "Yesterday(,) I saw him." makes the sentence sound more dramatic and puts more emphasis on "yesterday".

There is one type of short introductory phrases which should always be followed by a comma. Adverbs like "however", "nevertheless", "moreover", "therefore", etc., are always followed by a comma when used at the beginning of a sentence to provide a logical connection with what was said previously, for example:

> *I like him. However, I wouldn't want to work with him. (correct)*
> *I like him. However I wouldn't want to work with him. (wrong)*
>
> *I cleaned the bathroom. Moreover, I took out the rubbish. (correct)*
> *I cleaned the bathroom. Moreover I took out the rubbish. (wrong)*

(Note that "rubbish" is a British expression for what would be usually called "trash" or "garbage" in American English.) The comma is especially important in the case of "however" because without a comma, it means "no matter how", for example:

> *However much you try, you cannot win. (correct)*
> *However, much you try, you cannot win. (wrong)*

Comma and 'if'

The conjunction "if" behaves just like "which", "where", "who", etc.; that is, if it introduces a clause important for the overall meaning of the sentence, we don't use a comma before it (both in the meaning of "whether" and in the meaning of "when"):

> *I don't know if he comes. (correct)*
> *I don't know, if he comes. (wrong)*
>
> *Please let me know if something happens. (correct)*
> *Please let me know, if something happens. (wrong)*

Just like with the other conjunctions, only use a comma as an alternative to parentheses. There is, however, one important difference in usage. Unlike "which", "where", etc., "if" is often used at the beginning of a sentence (as a sort of an introductory phrase), and such a clause is always followed by a comma:

> *If the Potters come, there won't be enough chairs for all. (correct)*
> *If the Potters come there won't be enough chairs for all. (wrong)*
>
> *If something happens, please let me know. (correct)*
> *If something happens please let me know. (wrong)*

"Which", "where", and other conjunctions can also be used in this way, but such style is considered very formal and literary, and would be found mostly in older literature, poetry, and similar works of art:

> *What he told him, I don't know. (correct, literary)*

This construction should be avoided in normal writing and speech.

Comma before ‘because’

B*ecause* introduces a dependent clause that almost always contains essential information, so just like before “that”, “which”, “who”, etc., we usually don’t use a comma, e.g.

> *I must go to work now because my boss told me so. (correct)*
> *I must go to work now, because my boss told me so. (see below)*

The latter example implies that the fact that your boss told you so is mostly irrelevant—but why mention it then? A good rule of thumb is: If you don’t feel the need to put the clause starting with “because” in parentheses, don’t use a comma.

There is one important class of exceptions, however. When the first clause is negative, not affirmative, it is often recommended to use a comma to avoid possible misreading. The Chicago Manual of Style gives the following example:

> *He didn’t run, because he was afraid.*

This sentence can only be interpreted as “He didn’t run, and the reason was that he was afraid.” If we don’t use a comma, it can be misunderstood as “The reason why he didn’t run wasn’t that he was afraid.”, as in:

> *He didn’t run because he was afraid. He ran because he enjoys running.*

If the meaning is clear even without a comma, you can omit it, but you should use a comma whenever the first reading can result in misunderstanding.

Note that if the order of the *because*-clause and the main clause is reversed, we always use a comma, just like for “if”:

> *Because he was afraid, he didn't run. (correct)*
> *Because he was afraid he didn't run. (wrong)*

Serial (Oxford) comma

As you might have noticed, when there is a list of the form "A, B, ..., X, and Y" in this book, there is always a comma before "and". This is not a matter of correctness; if I omitted the commas, no-one could say that I made a mistake. However, the style I use is so common you should learn how it is used.

What I use is the so called *serial comma* or *Oxford comma* (or *Harvard comma*). For instance, in this book I wrote:

> *Just like water, sugar, and love, money can be used ... (ser. comma)*

Without the Oxford comma, the sentence would read:

> *Just like water, sugar and love, money can be used ... (no ser. comma)*

My personal feeling is that the Oxford comma improves clarity most of the time; for example, "water, sugar and love, money" in the sentence above without the comma may seem to be the first three items in a list that goes on, whereas "water, sugar, and love" makes it unambiguously clear that the list ended there. A famous example is a book dedication of the form:

> *To my parents, Ayn Rand, and God.*

The meaning is completely clear. Without the comma:

> *To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.*

Is the author claiming that he or she is the child of Ayn Rand and God? Probably not, but this is not clear from the punctuation.

The Oxford comma can, in much rarer cases, also create ambiguity. Imagine a dedication like:

> *To my mother, Ayn Rand, and God.*

Is Ayn Rand the mother's name, or are the mother and Ayn Rand two different people? Nevertheless, such ambiguities can virtually always be resolved using different punctuation marks or word order, e.g.

> *To my mother (Ayn Rand) and God.*
> *To my mother, God, and Ayn Rand.*

Ambiguities created by not using the serial comma are often much harder (or even impossible) to resolve.

Comma around 'etc.'

Should you use a comma before and after "etc."? There's no definitive answer, because different style guides recommend different usage. Nevertheless, the style that seems to be recommended most of the time is to *always include a comma before "etc."*; it is recommended even by those who discourage the use of the Oxford comma. For example:

> *He bought some apples, oranges, grapefruits, etc.*

If "etc." is not the last part of the sentence, it is also to be **followed** by a comma:

> *He bought some apples, oranges, grapefruits, etc., for his fruit salad.*

Some sources recommend not using any comma at all, e.g.

> *He bought some apples, oranges, grapefruits etc. for his fruit salad.*

but these are quite uncommon, and such usage is usually perceived negatively by those who do use the comma.