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THE NEW

Fowler's
**Modern
English
Usage**

FIRST EDITION

by H. W. Fowler

REVISED THIRD EDITION

by R. W. Burchfield

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3 Where *and*, *but*, or *or* joins two or more adjectives the comma is usually omitted: *a reluctant and limited step*; *the imaginative and dangerous energy of the son*; *solid but adventurous entrepreneurs*; *no extensive or protracted military intervention*.

4 Where more than two words or phrases or groupings occur together in a sequence, a comma should precede the *and* (the omission of the second comma in the fourth example would render the sentence ambiguous). This is the so-called 'Oxford comma'. Examples: *an index of social, economic, and religious diversity*; *excesses of public, political, and intellectual opinion*; *areas of natural beauty, architectural monuments, and sites of historical interest*; *New premises were opened by Marks & Spencer, Jaeger, and Currys*.

The 'Oxford comma' is frequently, but in my view unwisely, omitted by many other publishers. Their preference is to omit it as a general rule (e.g. *tea, scones and cake*) but to insert it if there is a danger of misunderstanding (*tea, bread and butter, and cake*—examples from J. McDermott, 1990). A fuller example: *The Mind of South Africa is an extremely ambitious blend of personal memoir, ideological polemic and orthodox history*—R. Malan in *London Rev. Bks*, 1990.

5 A comma is customary in sentences containing two main statements joined by a conjunction, or having some kind of complementary relationship. In such sentences, a comma is the equivalent of a slight pause. Examples: *Parliament is not dissolved, only prorogued*; *I believed, and therefore I spoke*; *The question is, can this be done?*; *My dear chap, please listen to me*; *One of the most densely populated countries in the world, it continually needs to reclaim land from the sea*; *Rents are high, and the shops are already going out of business*.

6 Plainly parenthetical clauses, phrases, or single words require commas before and after them: *Yet there's a chance that, despite the razzmatazz, van Gogh may actually not be turning in his grave*; *But the general tenor of life, even in Amsterdam, is peaceful and well organized*; *There were, to be sure, occasional eccentrics in nineteenth-century novels*; *Be assured, then, that I will not let you down*; *He saw, a moment later, that the game was up*.

7 A restrictive (or defining) relative clause does not require a comma. A non-restrictive (or non-defining) relative clause, i.e. one which by its nature supplies extra information, does. Thus (the examples are taken from CGEL 17.13): (restrictive) *The woman who is approaching us seems to be somebody I know*; (non-restrictive) *The Bible, which has been retranslated, remains a bestseller*.

8 Such adverbs as *already* and *soon* when used as the first word of a sentence are usually followed by a comma. So too with *however* and *moreover*, and when these two words are used in mid-sentence they are preceded and followed by a comma. Examples: *Already, prints and posters have turned anguished, passionate paintings into mere features of the décor*; *Muggings, however, are still reported in the Vondelpark after dark*; *Moreover, you were late home after school*; *Soon, some inner compulsion erupts into the pretty pictures*.

9 A comma is sometimes needed in order to avoid ambiguity: *In the valley below, the villages look very small* (so that *below* is not taken to be a preposition); *Mr Douglas Hogg said that he had shot, himself, as a small boy* (Mr Hogg is still alive).

10 Omit the comma in such appositive phrases as *my friend Judge Leonard, my son Jon*. But commas are needed in the type *His father, Humphrey V. Roe, was not so fortunate*.

11 Omit the comma when giving house numbers in addresses: *44 High Street*. Omit the comma in dates: *27 July 1990* (not *July 27, 1990*).

12 *Warning*. These rules apply now (1995), but wide variation can be seen in the work of many contemporary writers and, even more so, in that of earlier centuries. Thus: (a) We are all accustomed to the kind of endless comma-joined sentences that turn up from children or from our less literate friends, e.g. *We had a holiday in Florence, it was very hot, we could hardly bear it . . .* This device is commonly called the 'comma splice'.

Curiously, this habit of writing comma-joined sentences is not uncommon in both older and present-day fiction. Modern examples: *I have the bed still, it is in every way suitable for the old house where I live now*—E. Jolley, 1980 (Aust.); *The*

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