

Greetings!

Special Edition: National Punctuation Day

Question: What's better than birthdays, Mardi Gras, and the Fourth of July? National Punctuation Day, of course! A time to celebrate the colon, the comma, and the entire family of dashes, and to give each other the gift of syntactic salience. What could be more riveting? Forget the 5th of May and the 4th of July—it's the 24th of September that takes the cake!

In this special edition of *KB CommEntary*, we take a look at the funky little grammar anomaly that inspired an indie pop song: the Oxford Comma.

The What?

The Oxford Comma—also known as the Serial Comma or the Harvard Comma—is the comma used before the conjunction in a list of three or more items.

The American flag is red, white, and blue.

In the above sentence, the Oxford Comma is the one that follows *white* and comes right before *and* (which is the conjunction).

You can get to the city by car, train, bus, trolley, or taxi.

This time the conjunction is *or*, so the Oxford Comma is the one that follows *trolley*.

Okay, What About It?

It's more than a nifty name—there's actually an entire debate surrounding the Oxford Comma, specifically whether it's necessary to use. Some folks argue that it's optional to include, while others claim that it's essential. If you're a bit lost, the sample sentences used above would look like this if they didn't contain Oxford Commas:

The American flag is red, white and blue.

You can get to the city by car, train, bus, trolley or taxi.

So Who's Right?

Well, no one, really. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, which is used for all kinds of non-journalistic writing, stands by the Oxford Comma and always has. But the *Associated Press (AP) Stylebook*, which is followed by most newspapers, advises against it.

We at KB COMM are pro-comma, since its inclusion generally reduces ambiguity. Consider a fictional dedication of a book:

To my sisters, Julia Child, and Billy the Kid.

To my sisters, Julia Child and Billy the Kid.

In this case, eschewing the Oxford Comma makes it appear as though the author's sisters are Julia Child and Billy the Kid. But including the comma straightens everything out.

Including the comma also follows speech patterns more closely, since we generally pause after each item in a list (including the last) while speaking out loud. And there is always an Oxford Semicolon—if you're using semicolons in a list, there's no option to not include one before the conjunction. In the name of consistency, we advocate for consistent use of the Oxford Comma as well.

If you happen to disagree, then we of course respect your decision and wish you a happy National Punctuation Day nonetheless. But we will remind you that it's better to keep Julia Child and Billy the Kid at a safe distance from one another.

We hope you enjoyed this special edition of *KB CommEntary*. Stay tuned for our regular Fall 2012 issue, coming in a few weeks.

And please remember, *when it has to be right*, KB COMM is here to help.

Sincerely,

Kathy

Kathy Breuninger

KB COMM

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