



GRAMMAR GROWLS WITH THE GRAMMAR OWL – COMMAS (part 1)



Commas seem like a simple thing. Just a little mark, innocuous, not a problem to use. Still, it's surprising how often the comma trips people up, one way or another. There are a seeming multitude of rules about comma use. The Owl is only going to cite a few of them, lest you slip into a grammar-induced coma, which is very different from a grammar-induced comma. 😊

In no particular order, a rule for every talon on the Grammar Owl's feet (with the pertinent comma in the example highlighted in red):

1. Commas separate dates. Not the cooing, lovebird type of dates. We don't want to separate them (well, not all the time, anyway). Nor is Owl referring to the dates which enhance many recipes. Oh dear — I see Owl tapping one talon on the edge of his barn window. I'd better get to the point of this point. Commas separate calendar dates when they are written. For example, Monday, November 17, 2014 requires a comma after Monday, and a comma after the number of the date, before the year.

They also separate place names, for example, Barmby-on-the-Moor, Yorkshire, England. (That's where some of my ancestors are from. I don't know how good they were at commas, but since they produced descendants, they must have been good at dates... Oops. There's the tapping talon again. Enough of this nonsense.)

2. Commas separate dialogue from dialogue tags. "I would like a date square with my tea," said Lizzie. Note the two exceptions: if there is a question mark or an exclamation mark following the dialogue, no further punctuation is necessary. "Would you like a date square?" asked Beth. "I want a date square, too!" said Eliza.

3. Commas separate adjectives when two or more are used together. "Instead of tea, I'd like a tall, cool, ice-filled glass of lemonade," said Anne.

4. Commas separate parts of a sentence that contrast with each other. “Instead of tea, you’d like lemonade?” asked Beth. (Beth seems a little slow on the uptake in these examples, does she not?)

5. Commas set off clauses that add information, but are not crucial to the meaning of the sentence. Beth, who hadn’t been paying attention, finally realized that Anne wanted lemonade. If the clause that’s enclosed in commas is removed, the basic meaning of the sentence remains. Beth finally realized that Anne wanted lemonade.

6. Commas are used between independent clauses that are joined by coordinating conjunctions. No, coordinating conjunctions are not ones that consulted with each other about what to wear before attending the tea party. The Harbrace College Handbook says that “coordinating conjunctions connect sentence elements (words, phrases, or clauses) of equal grammatical rank.”

If you learned in school that FANBOYS is a good acronym for remembering coordinating conjunctions, you’re on your way to using commas correctly in this instance. For those of us who didn’t learn that mnemonic device, myself included, it’s a handy tool to memorize. For And Nor But Or Yet So (which, in this case, is not merely a needle pulling thread) — these are the seven coordinating conjunctions.

Eliza will have tea, but Anne prefers lemonade. “Eliza will have tea” and “Anne prefers lemonade” are complete clauses of equal value. Each could be a sentence on its own, but when left together in one sentence, and separated by a coordinating conjunction, there must be a comma after the first clause.

7. Commas are used to prevent confusion in reading. Tea cakes and lemonade were served at Beth’s party. Hmm... Do you recall tea cakes being on the menu? With proper comma placement, we read Tea, cakes, and lemonade were served at Beth’s party. (We also see that Beth is partial to the Oxford, or serial, comma, which we won’t get into here.) The use and misuse of this grammatical rule is lampooned to great effect on the internet, as well as in the grammatical guide *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* by Lynne Truss.

8. Commas are used to set off words such as therefore and however when they interrupt the flow of the sentence. “I don’t like tea. I would, therefore, prefer lemonade, instead,” said Anne, for the third time. Do you think Anne has made her point? Beth, however, poured tea into Anne’s glass. Oops.

I hope this has helped clear up some of the rules surrounding comma usage. At the very least, it will have shown you the wisdom of pouring your own beverage. 😊

NOTE: This post is meant as a general overview, not an exhaustive list.