

It is by punctuation that the writer is made aware of the distinction and tension between speech and writing, . . . [B]y dividing the words and phrases up in certain ways, the writer is forced continually to contemplate how written language is like oral language, and how it is not. (73)

Steedman, "The Practice of Writing" from *The Radical Soldier's Tale*

To the seminarians: I am hereby bequeathing you my Lesson On The Comma.

The Comma

I will assume that you know about the use of commas in a list (*peas, beans, and carrots*).

But wait, you might ask, can't it be "peas, beans and carrots"? With no comma before the *and*? Yes, it can, although many style manuals will say NO; or they will say, you can but you shouldn't; it's not a good idea.

The comma before the *and* (above) is called the Oxford Comma, and it is called the Oxford Comma because it is required by the Oxford University Press. The point of the Oxford Comma is to keep you from an awkward mistake, like: The adults I most admire are my parents, Lady Gaga and Donald Trump."

And I assume that you know to put a comma to indicate the break between two independent clauses joined, for example, with *and* or *but*:

"I applied to the University of Pittsburgh, and I was admitted in April, 2017." Or, "I applied to the University of Pittsburgh, but my parents insisted that I go to Penn State."

It serves, here, as a kind of signpost. It tells a reader that there is a turn in the road.

The difficulty with the comma is that it is a crucial piece of punctuation, but its use is not strictly rule-governed. The lesson below will not begin to cover ALL of the cases that might require a comma, but it will cover many of them, and particularly those where a misplaced or missing comma will make readers anxious, crazy, and/or furious.

So, here's how to make good decisions about the comma:

1. Do not assume that there is a relationship between the comma and a pause. There are many occasions to pause when reading or writing sentences. Not all of them indicate a place for a comma.
2. Understand that the comma is related to the structure of the sentence. Its primary function is to provide information to a reader, to let a reader know where she is in relation to the larger structure of the sentence. The use of the comma is determined by the structure of the sentence.

Here is a brief demonstration. (I am working with a sentence from the “Prologue” to Stephen Greenblatt’s lovely book, Hamlet in Purgatory.)

Every sentence has a base or kernel (the grammatical core of the full utterance). It is the sentence reduced to its core. Here, for example, is a kernel sentence:

The little children were told by their teacher to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms.

2a. If you add an introductory clause or phrase, you need to set it off with a comma. This lets a reader know when the introduction is over and the kernel sentence begins. Readers need a sense of where they are going in order to negotiate all those words on the page.

On a normal school day, after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train, the little children were told by their teacher to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms.

The first comma (between “day” and “after”) is required under the principle of the list. That list could have been extended indefinitely: *On a normal school day, when the sun was high in the sky, late in the month of September, after the celebration of Yom Kippur, and after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker,...*

The second comma indicates that the introductory phrase is complete and the core or kernel sentence is about to begin: *After being taken to the apartment of Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train,* the little children were told.....

This is some leeway here. If the opening phrase is quite short, some writers will leave off the comma. (*On a normal school day children are told to be good.*) You can’t go wrong by adding the comma anyway: *On a normal school day, children are told to be good.* With long, complicated opening phrases or clauses, it is a different story. Readers will most likely be confused and/or annoyed if the comma is missing.

2b. If you separate subject and verb, you put a comma before and after the unit that interrupts subject and verb.

On a normal school day, after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train, the little children, six of them, were told by their teacher to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms.

2c. The same is true, actually, of any parenthetical expression (like the “actually” in this sentence). Just as you need to open and close a parenthesis (like this), you need commas at each end of the parenthetical.

On a normal school day, after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train, the little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms.

The principle here is simple: a reader needs to know that you are taking time off before completing the base sentence.

There is no leeway here. If you break the conventions represented by 2b and 2c, readers will be confused and annoyed. In these cases, you will most likely be said to have made a stupid mistake.

2d. And you use a comma in certain cases when you are adding a phrase or clause to the end of a base sentence. If you add a *non-restrictive* element at the end of the base sentence, you indicate that with a comma. A *non-restrictive* element is something you've added because you felt like it. You use a comma to let a reader know that this is an addition.

On a normal school day, after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train, the little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms, while the man's wife wailed inconsolably in a corner. *Non-restrictive*

A *restrictive* element is a piece of language required to complete the meaning of the sentence and, therefore, you do not include a comma. In the case of a restrictive element, readers need to know that their work is not over yet.

On a normal school day, after being taken to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train, the little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the mangled corpse and to recite the psalms in order to complete the act of mourning as required by the Torah. *Restrictive*

You get the greatest leeway with additions to the end of a sentence.

2e. You can also hang something onto the end of a sentence with a dash—like this.

3. Here is the actual sentence from Greenblatt. Notice how he uses dashes in order to situate one more parenthetical. The dash is a useful additional signpost for a reader who has already been busy processing commas:

My father was born in the late nineteenth century. I was the child of what I used to think of as his old age but that I have now, at my point in life, come to think of, rather, as his vigorous middle age. I saw him, in any case, as embodying the life experience not of the generation directly behind me but of two generations back. His own childhood memories seemed to have a quite unusual, almost eerie distance from my life-world. Hence, for example, he told me that when he was very young, he was taken, along with

the other boys in his Hebrew school class (his *cheder*) to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train. **The little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the mangled corpse—which was placed on great cakes of ice, since it was the summer in Boston and very hot—and to recite the psalms, while the man’s wife wailed inconsolably in a corner.**

Initiated, perhaps, by this traumatic experience, my father was obsessed throughout his life with death. (6)

What a tough subject and what lovely writing!

To review:

So, remember, you use a comma to help a reader negotiate beginnings, middles and endings. Beginnings and middles are most crucial. A reader’s brain is searching for subject and verb, the grammatical core. The brain is anxious until it finds home base. Once again:

I took a job at the University of Pittsburgh.

After completing a PhD at Rutgers University in 1975, **I took a job at the University of Pittsburgh.**

After completing a PhD at Rutgers University in 1975, **I**, deep in debt and with a child on the way, **took a job at the University of Pittsburgh.**

After completing a PhD at Rutgers University in 1975, **I took a job at the University of Pittsburgh**, a school just about to enter the top ranks of U.S. research institutions. (non-restrictive)

After completing a PhD at Rutgers University in 1975, **I took a job at** a university in Pittsburgh looking for an Assistant Professor interested in teaching the first year writing course. (restrictive)

If you are looking for more Stephen Greenblatt, check out: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, winner of the 2011 National Book Award and a 2012 Pulitzer Prize.

If you are looking for more on the comma, see a lovely essay by Mary Norris (the *New Yorker*’s “comma queen”): “Holy Writ: Learning to Love the House Style.”
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/holy-writ>