

SERIAL COMMAS RULE!

IT'S OFFICIAL. CANADIAN EDITORS LOVE SERIAL COMMAS.

In December 2009, *Active Voice* sponsored a nationwide vote on the serial comma, inviting members of the association to participate in the vote “Serial commas: hot or not?” Voters were given one of three options: “for,” “against,” and “undecided.” The result? Fans of the serial comma prevailed: of the 418 votes cast, 320 (76.6%) were “for” the comma and 93 (22.2%) were “against.” Only 5 votes (1.2%) fell into the “undecided” category. (See sidebar on opposite page for a breakdown of the numbers.)

Voters were encouraged to include comments of up to 50 words, explaining their feelings about the controversial comma. In all, 134 people submitted comments, and as you'll see, they ranged from the scholarly to the sublime.

Long live the serial comma!—Eds.



FOR THE SERIAL COMMA

On a train, two strangers will put the armrest down between them; a couple will raise it. When there's a serial comma, you read each item on the list as separate, but when that comma is absent, you read the last two items as having a special relationship. Punctuation should clarify meaning, not muddle it! *Alison Kooistra*

This simple device—the serial comma—circumvents confusion. Who would have thought a tiny mark could create such clarity? And such a furor? *Morgan Chojnacki*

I cannot recall any situation where the use of a serial comma has caused confusion. I can recall many instances where the absence of a serial comma has caused confusion. Therefore I vote for serial commas. *Jim Taylor*

Long live recognizable rules, exceptional clarity, and definable consistency ... and security in the unquestionable realization that I am referring to three distinct qualities, rather than two examples of recognizable rules. *Jessica Krippendorf*

“In any series, all items should be syntactically and conceptually parallel.” (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* [6th ed.], 2010, p. 63.)

Omission of the final comma before the last item in a series leads to misconceptions and errors in fact and understanding. If saving a character or space is the issue, then delete the unnecessary second space after a period, question mark, and other final sentence punctuation! *Shari Yore*

Even though the serial comma isn't always needed for clarity, there are many cases where it really improves a sentence. Here is a great example of this: “I'd like to thank my parents, Stephen Harper and Madonna.” Wouldn't a serial comma come in handy there? *Sandra Hawryn*

Serial commas are often needed for clarity. Take this (hypothetical) example: “Francis Blodgins was successively bishop of Bangor, Bath and Wells, and Lincoln.” “Bath and Wells” is the title of a single English bishopric; but without the serial comma, how would the uninitiated know that? *William Cooke*

The serial comma is essential to avoid ambiguity. All lexicographers use it (I challenge anyone to find a reputable dictionary that does not feature it). Here is my favourite example of the perils of omitting the serial comma (courtesy of a friend in the lexicographical business, some years ago): “I dedicate this book to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.” *Victoria Neufeldt*

Clarity, clarity, clarity. *Audrey McClellan*

Not using it requires more judgment, which a lot of people don't have enough of. For the most part it improves clarity and keeps confusion to a minimum. *Doug Linzey*

In scientific editing, it's *de rigueur*. Lists of long, confusing items can lose the reader. There often need to be “and”s inside discrete items in a list, adding to the confusion. I've worked in styles with and without the serial comma, and I think the serial comma rules. *Carolyn Brown*

“This survey is why I love being a member of EAC! *Linda Jenkins*”

Not only does the serial comma reflect a natural pause in speech, it frequently disambiguates meaning or at least aids in parsing

when the final elements of a list are at all structurally complex. These are the upsides to its inclusion; there are no downsides. *Debbie Sawczak*

It illustrates and conforms to the natural flow of English speech. I have one weekly editorial task that relentlessly follows *Canadian Press* guidelines, which eschew the serial comma. I still manage to slip one past the proofreader once in a while. *Donald Ward*

A vote for the serial comma is a vote for the graceful pause in formal narrative, versus the instant message; the non-

contextualized, non-punctuated blather of online noise. The medium is, and should inform, the message. *Marion Robb-Gardner*

If you use serial commas you can rarely be accused of ambiguity, in text that is. They help keep elements in neat little compartments. Besides, I just like them. *Nora Russell*

There is no question that the serial comma adds clarity. No reader should have to read anything twice to understand something once. *Frances Emery*

I love the serial comma because it provides clarity, and isn't that what editors—and readers—want? *Sandy Stark*

I think it gives equal weight to the multiple elements in a series—without it, the final element sounds less important somehow, like something added on as an afterthought. *Martha Uniacke Breen*

What's the harm? Less thinking is required to understand. *Ken Weinberg*

I was persuaded by colleagues about 10 years ago that the serial comma had clear advantages, so I gave it a try. I've been using it ever since and can't believe I ever punctuated any other way. *Kathy Vanderlinden*

Serial commas reduce ambiguity, sparing us sentences like this one in a recent newsletter sent home by my son's school: "Don't recycle any dirty containers or bags, drink containers which are not empty, chip bags or any plastic with a silver interior or styrofoam." *Ursula Acton*

AGAINST THE SERIAL COMMA

Serial comma is spreading like a bad weed, largely because it is a default in Word's grammar check. I refuse to use it on principle: real editors

don't take direction on style from Microsoft! *A.C. Ogg*

I think one's opinion of the serial comma is related to age—I just turned 30 and in school I was taught not to use the serial comma, as was my husband, who is 27. As a result, we both say a resounding "NO!" But perhaps it's just indoctrination... *Kate Guthrie*

Modern punctuation rules are based on the principle that if you need a mark of punctuation, use it; if you don't, don't. The serial comma is redundant in nearly all cases, and in the few where it's necessary for clarity, the "no serial comma" approach says to insert it. So why would we tidy up our prose by striking all unnecessary punctuation on the one hand, but litter it with superfluous commas on the other? *Frances Peck*

EAC members who are also Facebook users may wish to become fans of the Oxford Comma page and/or *The Chicago Manual of Style* page. *Theresa Yoshioka*

They add clutter to the page. There are a few cases where they are necessary for sense but otherwise their use is arbitrary. *Ruth Chernia*

I find it usually so easy to clear up any confusion its exclusion is claimed to cover by basic grammatical conventions that are more appropriate, such as a dash or slight rewording. Occasionally it is necessary for clarity, but I find it rare indeed. I find in many cases the argument for its inclusion treats the reader like a simpleton. *Joanne Haskins*

The less ink, the better. *Dan Hebert*

I don't like the serial comma—I think it is superfluous. However, I do use it in front of the "and" if the last item in the list includes an "and" or an "or." *Maria Menné*

I work in magazines—the serial comma is pretty rare. *Brooke O'Hara*

No, no, no, no and no! *Kent Walker*

For most uses, the defunct, antiquated and cumbersome serial comma is simply not required. The serial comma

lives up to its name as a "repeat offender" and should be banished unless needed for clarity. *Sharon McInnis*

I am a comma minimalist, and though that may not be the popular choice, I definitely do not like the serial comma. Less is more, in my opinion. *Jacqueline Snider*

Do not see the value in blindly advocating for always using the serial comma. Where it's of value in improving readability, then please

NATIONAL RESULTS

For: 320 (76.6%)
Against: 93 (22.2%)
Undecided: 5 (1.2%)
Total votes: 418

REGIONAL RESULTS

Western Canada

For: 127 (78.4%)
Against: 33 (20.4%)
Undecided: 2 (1.2%)
Total votes: 162

Central Canada

For: 175 (77.8%)
Against: 48 (21.3%)
Undecided: 2 (0.9%)
Total votes: 225

Eastern Canada

For: 18 (60%)
Against: 11 (36.7%)
Undecided: 1 (3.3%)
Total votes: 30

Overseas

For: 1 (100%)
Against: 0
Undecided: 0
Total votes: 1

THE NUMBERS

THE UN-DECIDED

The truth is that I do hold an opinion on this subject. I think that the choice between the use or non-use of the serial comma should be left entirely up to the individual writer or editor. Both are fine provided that things are done with absolute consistency. *Patricia Bishop*

I'm used to using it, and always do (unless instructed otherwise), but I don't feel strongly about it. *Dimitra Chronopoulou*

I tend towards a serial comma, but follow client preference. Oddly, most prefer no serial comma, but in practice they tend to use it and spend time eradicating it. *Diane Harms*

continued opposite...

...AGAINST

use it. But it is not essential; reducing unnecessary punctuation should be our objective. *Dave Ealey*

Let's be honest: it looks especially dumb next to the non-coordinate-conjunctive "or". Here's the next big vote in my opinion: can we all agree to place quotation marks within the period if, as above, they are just drawing attention to a key word (and, say, italics aren't available)? *Scott Withers*

"And" does the work of the serial comma. The serial comma causes a pause in the sentence that isn't needed. Not using a serial comma encourages writing in plain English. Fewer keystrokes! *Theresa Best*

Trained in *CP*, so no comma. Work with *CMOS* for *The Walrus*, so yes comma. Accustomed to it now, but still prefer none (unless third item contains a non-parallel element). *Pamela Capraru*

Although I generally see the serial comma as unnecessary, I will use it when it aids clarity, such as in a list in which each item is many words. *Donna Dawson*

In addition to less being more, less punctuation is the way of the future. *Käthe Lemon*

I think a serial comma is unnecessary in a list made up of single, unconnected words; it should only be used for purposes of clarity. *Catherine van Baren*

In the *West Coast Editor* vote, I voted "for," but I have been persuaded by Frances Peck that the serial comma is redundant (meant to replace "and" in a series, but "and" is already there at the end of the series) and should be used only when needed to avoid ambiguity. I no longer use it as a matter of course. *Joyce Gram*

[I don't use the serial comma]... except where necessary for clarity. Otherwise, simplest is best! *Eric Mills*

Too many commas create clutter. No ambiguity, no need for comma. *David Greer*

I like to use the serial comma only when it's necessary to avoid confusion. *Marlene MacIsaac*

I was a firm advocate of the serial comma until attending a class where the instructor didn't like us using them. I stopped then and have never had a need to go back. *Roberta Laurie*

The "Oxford" comma is usually completely redundant. Only on very rare occasions does not using it cause confusion, in which case it may be used. *Paddy O'Brien*

Personal preference. *Stephanie Campbell*

The only time I'd use a serial comma is when leaving it out would cause confusion about how the sub-groups or elements in the chain of descriptions should read or are grouped. I work online, where less is more! *Marla Fletcher*

There's no comma between two items separated by "and," so why should the last of more than two claim the distinction? *Jake Hogeterp*

Exceptions exist, of course, where the serial comma greatly clarifies meaning. *Helene Roulston*

Why clutter up a sentence any further than you have to? *Pam Robertson*

There are so many rules and exceptions already; I don't feel there is a need to add a serial comma. *Ellen Hermans*

The serial comma is redundant, doing the same job as "and" at the end of a list. Although I am forced by many clients' style guides to use it, I prefer to use that extra comma only to make a list that contains compound items more clear. *Christine Rowlands*

I'm against it in text aimed at a general audience, except when needed for clarity. I find it clutters up the sentence. But I use it when editing scholarly texts, where the serial comma is the norm. *Anne Louise Mahoney*

I only favour using the serial comma when it's necessary to ensure the clarity of a sentence. *John Eberlee*

MORE FOR...

Great survey. I, for one, am very distracted when serial commas are missing, and find that it's impossible to create a sentence containing a list of complex items without one. They are a kindness to readers! *Tamra Ross*

Use the serial comma when it makes the meaning clearer. *Carolyn Wilker*

I am becoming a fan of the Oxford comma, and am beginning to use it consistently in my work. The only place I still avoid it is in bullet-point lists, where I try to avoid punctuation in general for visual simplicity and to acknowledge people's becoming more comfortable understanding the intended structure of these lists. *Michelle Black*

A sentence just looks unfinished when the last comma in a series is missing. It always irks me to have to leave it out.
Wendy Scavuzzo

I follow *Hart's Rules*, where the "serial" comma is also described as the "Oxford comma," since it remains a consistent component of OUP house style. Besides, old habits, like long-term memories, are usually the last to fade.
Kevin Burns

It simply makes things clearer and flow better.
Zia Holte

Sometimes, when I use the serial comma in something non-technical, the author(s) get very upset because it goes against their lifetime practice. Then I leave it out.
Merridy Cox Bradley

It eliminates any ambiguity.
Paul Payson

Clarity.
Jennifer Getsinger

Consistent clarity. Period.
Fred DeRosa

The serial comma avoids confusion, clarifying the meaning of sentences, and is consistent treatment between elements in a list. And heck, it just looks good before that "and," too.
Heather Hepplewhite

It achieves clarity and saves time. At my company, the serial comma is not house style, but I still add it on occasion for clarity; if it were house style, there would be no time or effort spent deciding whether to add it or not. As a reader, I don't find it intrusive and usually welcome it.
Janet C. Thompson

Habit!
Nancy Ackerman

I used to prefer the cleaner, more open look of not using the serial comma, but I've come to appreciate the delightful simplicity of having one rule and sticking to it from an editing perspective.
Lori Anderson

I'm glad you extended the deadline so I can vote in favour of a punctuation tool I use, promote, and respect.
Anne Judd

The serial comma adds clarity to a text.
Louise Guénette

Adds clarity.
Francine VanWoudenberg Sikkema

I used to really hate it, since I was taught that a comma replaces "and" in a long sentence and that a serial comma was thus redundant. But now that I've been working for companies that use it, and have worked as an audiobook narrator, I see the wisdom of this nifty little "pause."
Jennifer McIntyre

I always use serial commas but am not in favour of the last comma before "and" or "or." I understand that it reduces ambiguity but it clutters up the page for me, and I always tend toward a clean-looking page.
Myrna Riback

It rules out ambiguity!!
Marg Anne Morrison

A series of single words ("I eat apples, oranges and bananas") is clear without the final comma; a series of phrases may be misinterpreted without it ("Many lost all they owned, most lost homes and jobs and some people lost hope and confidence"). For consistency, the serial comma should be retained as a guideline for editing.
Sharon Carere

Serial commas act as flags to the reader in a similar way to bullets, hyphens, and layout: they indicate items of a parallel nature.
Kerry Surman

Claudette Upton's example of why we need the serial comma is the best I've heard: "I owe all that I am to my parents, Ayn Rand and God."
Hugh Macdonald

It ensures both clarity and consistency.
Lynne Melcombe

I don't normally see the world as so black and white. Sometimes it depends. But I usually prefer the serial comma when I get to choose.
Patsy Price

I like the visual consistency. The serial comma neatly partitions every element and reduces confusion overall.
Mireille Smith

I'm in favour of any punctuation that helps the writer to avoid confusing the reader. In some cases, the serial comma does just that.
Harlan James

I prefer it for clarity. However, in some texts, where I want a more casual feel, I do not use it. So it depends on

the specific material, but my default preference is to use it.
James Harbeck

The serial comma ensures clarity, consistency, and (arguably) character.
Nancy Barker

While I believe that print looks cleaner without the serial comma, language is as much aural as visual. For a reader, the serial comma further accentuates the pause between items in a list and indicates the list is about to end.
Christina Vasilevski

The same reason remains over the years for its use: to help prosody and to avoid ambiguity.
Jean Bauer

I believe the serial comma is essential for clarity. I have edited many manuscripts with ambiguous text because the serial comma was lacking.
Connie Vanderwaard

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It should depend on the context of the individual passage: absolute consistency throughout a document should not be required. Clarity, reader-friendliness(,) and lack of intrusiveness should be the primary considerations. Maintaining consistency across the document should be secondary—nice to have, but not at the expense of the primary factors.
Stan Backs

"No opinion" means both "for" and "against." Consistency is all. Using the serial comma is easier because it's enforceable without exceptions. It also creates clear articulation in advertising and in narrow columns. Not using serial commas in a literary work permits a longer thought line and the spare overall punctuation style that suits some works best.
Laurel Boone

THE UN- DECIDED