

Uncommonly Useful: The Comma (,)

There's nothing much to punctuating a sentence, really, beyond a little comma sense. Get the commas right, and the rest will fall into place.

Yeah, yeah, I hear you saying. What's a comma or two—or three? How can something so small, so innocuous, be important? Well, that attitude can get you tossed into grammatical purgatory. You don't believe it? Take a look:

Cora claimed Frank planned the murder.

Without commas, the finger of guilt points to Frank. But add a pair of commas, and Cora becomes the suspect:

Cora, claimed Frank, planned the murder.

Here's another pair of examples with completely different meanings:

Augie quit saying he was looking for another job.

Augie quit, saying he was looking for another job.

In the first sentence, Augie quit talking; in the second, he quit his job.

The lesson: Don't take commas for granted. They're like yellow traffic lights. If you ignore one, you could be in for a bumpy ride.

Most problems with commas have to do with dividing a sentence into parts—larger parts like clauses (each with its own subject and verb), or smaller ones like items in a series. Commas are also used to interrupt a sentence and insert an-

other thought. Here's how to get out of some of the most common comma complications.

LONG AND SHORT DIVISION

- Use a comma to separate big chunks (clauses) of a sentence with *and* between them. *Tina hadn't left the city in months, and by Friday she was climbing the walls.* If there's no *and* in between, use a semicolon instead: *Tina hadn't left the city in months; by Friday she was climbing the walls.*
- Use commas to separate a series of things or actions. *She packed a toothbrush, a blow-dryer, her swimsuit, and her teddy bear. She finished packing, paid some bills, ate a few Oreos, and watered the plants.*

NOTE: The final comma in those two series, the one just before *and*, can be left out. It's a matter of taste. But since its absence can sometimes change your meaning, and since there's no harm in leaving it in, my advice is to stick with using the final comma.

AS I WAS SAYING

- Use commas before and after the names of people you're talking to: "*Good-bye, Mom. Dad, be good,*" she said, and hung up the phone. You can skip the comma before the name if all that precedes it is *and* ("*And Mom, don't worry*") or *but* ("*But Dad, you promised*").

- Use commas before or after a quotation: "Let's see," said Tina. Or: Tina said, "Let's see." But don't use a comma after a quotation that ends with an exclamation point or a question mark: "Have I forgotten anything?" she wondered. "Sunscreen!" she exclaimed.

LET ME INTERRUPT

- Use a comma after an introductory phrase if a pause is intended: *As usual, she checked to make sure the stove was turned off. Of course, it always was. You see, Tina was a bit compulsive.*
- Use commas around an aside—information that could just as well go in parentheses: *Her upstairs neighbor, the one without the tattoos, promised to collect her mail.*
- Use commas around *which* clauses: *The airport bus, which was usually on time, never came. So she took a taxi, which cost her an arm and a leg.*

But don't use commas around *that* clauses: *The bus that she had planned to take never came, so she grabbed the first taxi that she saw.*

For more on *which* and *that*, see page 3.



Semi-Avoidance: The Unloved Semicolon (;)

The semicolon is one of the most useful but least used punctuation marks. For whatever reason, many of us avoid it. Maybe it intimidates us; it shouldn't. (See, wasn't that easy?) If a comma is a yellow light and a period is a red light, the semicolon is a flashing red—one of those lights you drive through after a brief pause. It's for times when you want something stronger than a comma but not quite so final as a period. Here's when to use it.

- Use a semicolon to separate clauses when there's no *and* in between: *Andy's toupee flew off his head, it sailed into the distance.*
- Use semicolons to separate items in a series when there's already a comma in one or more of the items: *Fred's favorite things were his robe, a yellow chenille number from Barney's; his slippers; his overstuffed chair, which had once been his father's; murder mysteries, especially those by Sue Grafton; and single-malt Scotch.*

