No Comma Drama (Part One)

If you attended a U.S. elementary school in the 1970s and '80s, you may have evaded formal instruction in English grammar and punctuation. I know that I did. Fortunately, many of us absorbed the most important rules—the ones that ensure clarity—from reading and, if we were lucky, from good written feedback on our later written work. But if you had asked me in 1995 to define "comma splice," you would have received a blank stare.[1]

You also may have learned that you should use a comma whenever you might pause in reading a sentence aloud. That rule made sense to me until I started listening more closely to how people talk. Either there must be some additional rule, or Vince Vaughn and Christopher Walken must punctuate the same sentence very differently.[2]

What rules apply, then, for comma usage? I find it easiest to remember the six primary situations in which it is appropriate to use a comma. If I recognize one of those situations, I insert a comma. If I do not recognize one of those situations, I omit (or delete) a comma that might otherwise tempt me. Those six primary occasions are:

- To separate words or phrases in a series of three or more
- To separate two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction
- To set off a nonessential element
- To set off introductory matter
- To separate coordinate adjectives and adverbs
- To set off a direct quotation of 50 words or fewer

I discuss the first three occasions in this month's column; we'll tackle the other three, and a few other less complicated examples, next month.

1. Use a comma to separate words or phrases in a series of three or more. You may remember this rule from the Great Oxford-Comma Debate of the Summer of 2014.[3] Even if you scorn my sage counsel and omit that crucial Clarity Comma[4] before the final *and*, you still must use a comma to separate the other words in the series. For example:

- The defense called four witnesses: the defendant, the defendant's mother, the defendant's sister, and the treating physician.
- Petey has shredded several shoes, the wall, and my phone charger.
- The witness testified that she saw Mr. Acme pick up the anvil, toss it over the cliff, and flee the scene.

2. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. By doing so, you create a compound sentence. An independent clause is one that includes a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought; it could stand alone as a complete sentence. Coordinating conjunctions include for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so. For example:

- Kevin's client wanted to go to trial, so he rejected the State's plea offer.
- No disputed issue of material fact exists, and the Court can decide this issue as a matter of law.

People most often err in applying this rule by failing to notice that they do not have an independent clause on each side of the coordinating conjunction. For example, you would not use a comma in these instances:

- Kevin's client wanted to reject the State's plea offer and go to trial.
- Jennifer scorned grammar and often made punctuation errors.

People also err here by omitting the coordinating conjunction, which creates a comma splice because a lone comma lacks the strength to adhere two independent clauses.[5]

3. Use a comma to set off a nonrestrictive clause or other nonessential elements—such as interrupting words or phrases like *however* or *of course*—from the rest of the sentence, whether those elements come at the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence. A nonrestrictive clause is one that could be omitted from the sentence without changing the essential meaning of that sentence. Some people refer to the nonrestrictive clause as parenthetical matter; it generally clarifies or explains something in the sentence, but the sentence stands without it. For example:

- Moose, who was a much better puppy than Petey is, only chewed furniture and shoes.
- If you always use the clarity comma, however, its omission conveys meaning.
- Sobbing, the witness fled the stand after Walt's devastating cross-examination.

Mindful comma usage enables you to control the meaning and flow of your writing. Stay tuned for more examples of how to kick that drum correctly and effectively.

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endnotes

1. Now, you receive a column on the topic.
2. They might.
3. If you're not doing so already, you should be reading the diverting and informative AZ Attorney blog. Tim Eigo covers one of our few disagreements—over that oh-so-essential comma before the *and* in a series—in the July 31, 2014, installment at http://tinyurl.com/SalmonOnCommas. He also links to my April 2014 column on the topic.
4. Should I trademark my rebranding effort? (*Editor's note:* Yes.)
5. See my June 2014 column for more on the comma splice.