

The Comma

by Noah Lukeman

"If you can master the uses of the comma—or even the basic ones—no other mark can hold any terrors for you."

—Harry Shaw, *Punctuate it Right*

The comma is the speed bump of the punctuation world. With its power to pause, the comma controls the ebb and flow of a sentence, its rhythm, its speed. Based on frequency alone, the comma wields tremendous influence, outnumbering the period by at least three to one, and outnumbering other punctuation marks by at least five to one. And yet, paradoxically, it is also the mark most open to interpretation. The comma has few hard rules, and as a result is the mark most often misused.

The comma can be used to divide. The word comes from Greek *komma* "short clause," which is a derivative of *koptein* "to cut off." In this sense, the comma can control meaning itself, since the same sentence cut in different ways takes on entirely new meaning.

Yet the comma can also connect. Two sentences can become one by virtue of a comma, and a sentence can be made longer in its own right by tacking on a comma. In this capacity, the comma is a people person, a middleman. It likes to be connected, and to make connections. Both divider and connector, the comma is schizophrenic.

The comma is supremely important if for no other reason than its relation to the period. Without the comma, the period is often left in the cold, waiting at the end of a long sentence without a rest stop. To grasp the comma's influence, imagine a long sentence without any commas:

A sentence like this without any commas makes

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it nearly impossible for readers to know when to pause if not when to stop and also makes them feel as if the period cannot come soon enough indeed should have come several moments ago.

You have to reread it several times just to work out its natural rhythm and grasp its meaning. Why would you, as a writer, want to make the reader work twice as hard? With the proper use of the comma, you won't have to.

HOW TO USE IT

The comma is probably the hardest of all punctuation marks to master. Not only is it the most flexible, not only are its uses the most varied, but it also carries few rules, and has been used (and not used) by great authors in many different ways.

That said, you can learn to master the comma. Its creative uses are many, and they must each be examined carefully.

- To connect. The comma can connect several half-ideas (or clauses) into one grand idea (the sentence). It is the glue that holds a sentence together. If a short sentence is lacking in fullness of meaning, a comma can step in to connect it to the sentences that follow:

I sat on a bench. I opened my book. I removed the bookmark.
I sat on a bench, opened my book, and removed the bookmark.

The commas here have connected three infantile sentences into one more elegant sentence. (Note that the second comma here, known as a "serial comma" or "Oxford comma," is optional.)

- To provide clarity. If a sentence conveys several ideas, a comma can help distinguish them. Without a comma, you risk readers reading from one clause to the other without grasping where one idea ends and another begins. Subsequently, each idea won't have the impact it could otherwise have, won't have the proper time and space to be digested. Consider:

She told me I looked like an old boyfriend of hers then turned and walked away.

Here we feel no pause between the first clause and the second, no time to digest. One comma, though, can



Noah Lukeman

make all the difference:

She told me I looked like an old boyfriend of hers, then turned and walked away.

Now we feel the proper pause, can fully process each of these clauses. In this capacity, commas act like buoys in the sea, letting us know when we're leaving one zone and entering another.

- To pause. This is what the comma was built for, where it really shines. A comma allows readers to catch their breath (as they would if reading aloud), and prevents a long sentence from reading like stream of consciousness. For example, read the following sentence aloud:

He raised his rifle cocked it adjusted his neck and had the deer in his sights but when he went to pull the trigger his hand started shaking again just like it had every day for the last two weeks or maybe three he couldn't be sure.

To pause. This is what the comma was built for, where it really shines. A comma allows readers to catch their breath (as they would if reading aloud), and prevents a long sentence from reading like stream of consciousness.

With no chance to pause, readers hopelessly build momentum until they crash into the period. It is the equivalent of taking one huge breath and seeing how much you can say before you burst. Sentences were not meant to be read that way, and should not be written that way. A few commas, though, can transform the reading experience:

He raised his rifle, cocked it, adjusted his neck, and had the deer in his sights, but when he went to pull the trigger his hand started shaking again, just like it had every day for the last two weeks, or maybe three, he couldn't be sure.

• The comma can be used to indicate a passing of time, particularly in creative writing. This is something rarely see employed well. Consider:

John thought about that and said

Although technically correct, we don't feel a pause here between John's thinking and his speaking. But if we add a comma:

John thought about that, and said,

Now we feel the moment. It is subtle, but a well-placed comma adds just enough time in a scene to make a difference, one that works subconsciously on the reader.

Consider this example from Jean Toomer's short story "Blood-Burning Moon":

Up from the skeleton walls, up from the rotting floor boards and the solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came.

The commas here, particularly since they encapsulate such long clauses, make us really pause, make us feel the approach of dusk.

Lynne Truss addresses this point with an apt story in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*: "Thurber was once asked by a correspondent: 'Why did you have a comma in the sentence, 'After dinner, the men went into the living room'?' And his answer was probably one of the loveliest things ever said about punctuation. 'This particular comma,' Thurber explained, 'was Ross's way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up.'"

• The comma can alter the very meaning of a sentence. Consider:

The windows with the glass treatment are holding up well.
The windows, with the glass treatment, are holding up well.

In the latter sentence, it's implied that the windows are holding up well *because* of the glass treatment; in the former, it can be understood that the windows, which were created with a glass treatment, are holding up well in general. The entire meaning of the sentence changes simply through the comma-placement.

• The comma can be used to offset a clause or idea, to allow it to stand out when it might otherwise be lost. Consider:

Taking medicine and eating well coupled with exercise can help assure a healthy life.
Taking medicine and eating well, coupled with exercise, can help assure a healthy life.

In the latter example, the commas force us to pause

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before and after "coupled with exercise," offsetting it and emphasizing a point that might have been glossed over otherwise.

• The comma can be used to maximize word economy. Placing a comma in the right spot can enable you to detail several words. For example:

I liked chocolate and she liked vanilla.
I liked chocolate, she vanilla.

All in all, the comma has so many different creative uses, and can enhance a work creatively in so many ways, that it can be detrimental *not* to use it. Like its cousin the period, it is one of the few marks of punctuation that must be used throughout.

Let's look at the comma in the hands of a master. Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, uses commas to create a memorable setting:

A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar.

It's amazing what he achieves in one sentence, all with the use of commas. He has created an entire setting. Each comma not only helps increase the list, but also separates and gives us time to ponder each aspect of the setting. By inserting all of this information under the umbrella of a single sentence, divided only by commas, Conrad asks us to experience this entire setting as one thought, asks us to realize the whole picture of this desolate place in one unremitting image.

Here's another example, this from the opening sentence of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*:

For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well.

This example comes at the suggestion of novelist Paul Cody. He offers this analysis: "This is a seemingly simple sentence, broken into six parts, using only commas. The language is spare, but the use of the commas give the sentence great power and irony. The reader has to pause five times, and the sense of the man is that he's a control freak, he's got everything in order, he's figured it all out. But each part of the sentence undermines what he's saying. We know he's got it all wrong, that he's figured out nothing, that he has no understanding whatsoever of sex, love, the human heart. And each comma makes us pause, is a nail in the coffin of his soul, his isolation."

James Baldwin uses the comma heavily in his story "Sonny's Blues":

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

The abundant commas here reflect the narrator's experience as he's reading the piece, reflect his being shocked by the news, and needing multiple pauses to take it all in. John Cheever uses the comma for a different effect in his story "The Enormous Radio":

Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were the parents of two young children, they had been married nine years, they lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they went to the theatre on an average of 10.3 times a year, and they hoped someday to live in Westchester.

The commas here mimic the feeling of detailing

items in a list. Except the shopping list here is their lives, which has been planned out too perfectly, too methodically. The commas subtly hint at this.

In her story "What I Know," Victoria Lancelotta uses commas to complement the content:

This is the sort of air that sticks, the kind you want to pull off you, away from your skin, or wipe away in great sluicing motions and back into the water where it surely belongs, because this is not the sort of air that anyone could breathe. You could die, drown, trying to breathe this.

We almost feel as if we're suffocating, drowning in her commas, which is exactly the type of air she's trying to describe.

In one of the great poems, "The Waste Land," T. S. Eliot opens with a comma-laden sentence:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Eliot could have chosen to separate each of these images into several sentences, but instead he chose to keep them together, in one long sentence, connected

by commas. By doing so, he forces us to take in the image of April in one long thought, and to fully realize how cruel it is.

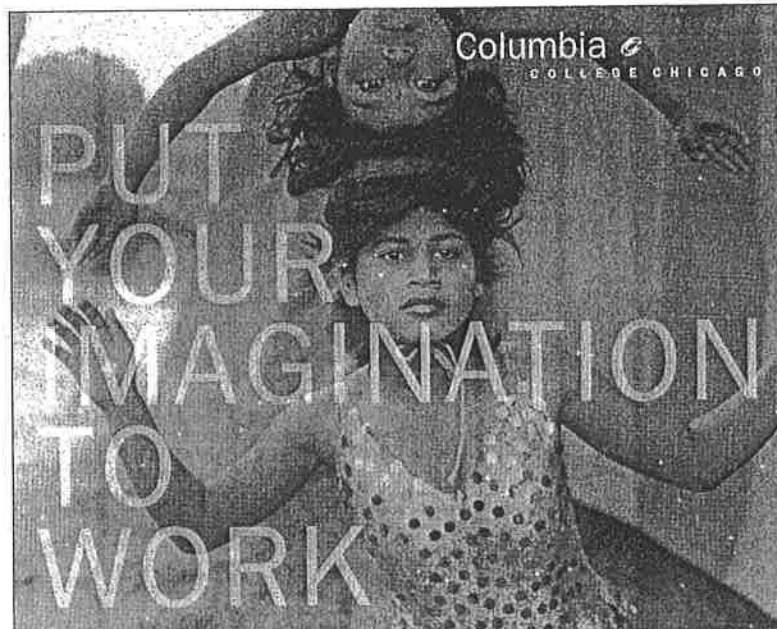
Perhaps for this reason, because of its ability to connect several images in one thought, you'll find that the comma is often used in literature when introducing a character. Consider this example from Saul Bellow's "Leaving the Yellow House":

You couldn't help being fond of Hattie. She was big and cheerful, puffy, comic, boastful, with a big round back and stiff, rather long legs.

From Ella Leffland's "The Linden Tree":

Giulio was a great putterer. You could always see him sweeping the front steps or polishing the doorknobs, stopping to gossip with the neighbors. He was a slight, pruny man of sixty-eight, perfectly bald, dressed in heavy trousers, a bright sports shirt with a necktie, and an old man's sweater-jacket, liver-colored and hanging straight to the knees.

The commas here enable you take in all of the character traits at once, to absorb this person in one image, as you might do if meeting him in person. Notice also the varying of style here: both of these examples begin with



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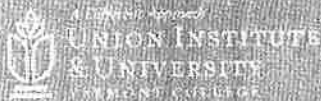
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short, comma-less sentences, and culminate in long, comma-laden sentences. Not only does this help to create contrast, to break up the rhythm and style, but it further demonstrates that the author's use of commas is deliberate.

DANGER OF OVERUSE

The necessity of the comma causes writers to misuse it more than any other punctuation mark. The period is luckier in this respect, since it appears less frequently and is less open to interpretation; the colon, semicolon and dash are also lucky, as they can easily absent themselves from most works, and thus hide from heavy misuse. Yet the comma demands to be used—and used frequently—and this, together with the fact that it carries nebulous rules, makes it a prime target. And the main way writers misuse the comma is to overuse it.

If there is anything worse than a work bereft of commas, it is one drowning in them. "Any one who finds himself putting down several commas close to one another should reflect that he is making himself disagreeable, and question his conscience, as severely as we ought to do about disagreeable conduct in real life," said the Fowler brothers in *The King's English* in 1905. This might be a bit extreme, but their point is well taken.

Overusing commas can create many problems:

- When a sentence is laden with commas, it slows to a crawl, makes readers feel as if they're ploughing through quicksand. For example:

The florist, the one with the red hair, who had the only shop in town, right on my corner, was having a sale, at least a partial sale, of her trees, which were half dead, and overpriced to begin with.

Readers don't want to have to stop several times to finish a single sentence. As a writer, your foremost concern is keeping readers turning pages, and thus you must be keenly aware of when you're slowing the pace, and only do so for an excellent reason. This especially holds true if you're in a section of your work, like an action scene, where a fast pace is required.

- A comma pauses, qualifies, or divides a thought, but if done too frequently, the original thought can become lost. For example:

We can eat our ice cream, soft, vanilla ice cream, with extra toppings, with those cherries on top, with whipped cream and hot fudge, in the living room.

The main point here was supposed to be that they could eat their ice cream in the living room. But with such a long aside, that point is all but lost. The commas, overused, distract to a fault.

Some would say, in a manner of speaking, that, given the context of the Greek empire, and the context of world affairs, Alexander, in view of his time, was a great warrior.

The comma can be overused when qualifying, as in the above example. When everything is qualified it creates a hesitant, unconfident feel to a work, as if the writer's afraid to say what he has to. Academics particularly fall prey to this. If we take out the qualifications (and the commas they demand), the point is more bold, succinct:

Alexander was a great warrior.

Now a stance is taken, and whether it's right or wrong, readers will admire it. Readers want strong arguments and strong opinions; they don't like writers who play it safe. There is a benefit to entertaining one thought—particularly a complicated one—without interruption.

- Sometimes commas are simply unnecessary. Some

sentences work with a comma, but also work equally well without one. If so, it is always preferable to omit it. For example:

He told me that, if I worked hard, he would give me Saturday off.

He told me that if I worked hard he would give me Saturday off.

Neither of these is "correct." It depends on your intent: if you really feel the need to emphasize the qualification of his working hard, then you need the commas. But if not, they can be removed. In writing, less is more, and you never want to slow the reader unless you have to.

HOW TO UNDERUSE IT

The comma is one of the only punctuation marks so widely used that its omission is a stylistic statement. Writers like Gertrude Stein and Cormac McCarthy are known for eschewing the comma, and books exist that never employed a single comma, notably Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, which won the 2001 Booker Prize. Why would writers opt to ignore the friendly comma? What would be gained from it?

The reasons for underusing the comma are largely similar to the reasons for not overusing it. Yet there is a subtle difference between aiming not to overuse something and deliberately aiming to underuse it. In the former, you aim to avoid, or edit out, a problem; in the latter, you aim to deliberately craft something in a certain way. The benefits achieved will largely parallel each other, yet there are different reasons for doing so, and different approaches.

- You might abstain from commas in order to speed up the pace, particularly in a section where the work lags. Comma-less writing is as fast as it gets. It accelerates the rhythm, and in some instances this is necessary.

- There might be times when you want a sentence to be read as a single uninterrupted thought. In such a case, removing the comma creates the desired effect:

I checked the filter, and changed the water, and hit the button three times, and the damned thing still wasn't working.

I checked the filter and changed the water and hit the button three times and the damned thing still wasn't working.

Both of these are acceptable, but they offer different effects. The latter reads as if spoken all in one breath, and the writer might want this effect to indicate the narrator's exasperation, a need to let it all out at once. It is a stylistic decision.

- The same holds true in dialogue, where the comma's impact is even more potent. You can, for example, omit commas in dialogue to indicate someone speaking all in one breath, or in a hurried manner. Consider:

"Turn right up Piccadilly and left up Regent Street and left down Oxford Street and step on it because I'm ten minutes late."

This can also be used to indicate someone in the midst of a heated dialogue, who, for example, won't let the other person get a word in. Or it can be used to indicate a distracted person, or one who has no attention span and who rambles on uncensored.

- Omitting commas can help achieve a stream-of-consciousness feeling.

When one reads a long free-flowing sentence like this without any commas it gives the feeling of letting it all out uncensored which is exactly what stream-of-consciousness writers are trying to achieve when crafting their work which they

Removing (commas) can send readers into a tailspin; they will plunge ahead, realizing something's amiss, but unable to stop until they've crashed headlong into the period.

might consider a sort of calculated spontaneity.

a comma-bereft sentence.

Pausing is synonymous with thinking and calculation, and thus it is not surprising that the hallmark of stream-of-consciousness writing is a dearth of commas.

Let's look at some examples from literature. In her story "Kew Gardens," Virginia Woolf deliberately omits commas when describing a flower bed:

• You can omit commas in order to deliberately gloss over something important. Some writers like to make readers work, to not lay out everything; for them, the joy comes in forcing the reader to decipher their text. One way of doing this is to mention an important item merely as an afterthought, perhaps even sandwich it between unimportant items. Some writers aim to create sentences that, if you read late at night, you are likely to miss. They might drop bombshells this way and keep going; the story has changed and the reader does not know why, and needs to go back and reread. It is the understated approach, the anti-revelation. And it can be facilitated by burying key information amidst

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into the heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half-way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of color raised upon the surface...

This is stylized, and will be hard for most readers to digest; but Woolf must have felt that it furthered her intention, or else she would not have chosen to omit the commas. You might say that omitting the commas here allows the reader to take in the entire beauty of the flower bed in one breathless sweep.

In one of her most famous poems, "Sonnet 43," Elizabeth Barrett Browning avoids commas to great effect:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

The three concepts "depth and breadth and height" could be separated by commas; by omitting them, Browning forces us to consider all three breathlessly, as if to further emphasize that there is no limit, or pause, to her love. Note also the varying of style here: she begins with two short sentences, the first culminating in a question mark, the second in a period, then follows with a long sentence. The variety gives us a fullness we would not have otherwise.

DANGER OF UNDERUSE

With all reward comes potential risk. If you go too far in your underuse of the comma, you run into other dangers, and come full circle back to the same problems that required you to implement the comma in the first place. A few potential pitfalls:

• On the most basic level, a sentence bereft of commas can be hard to understand. The main function of the comma is to clarify, and when commas are missing, readers can confuse one clause of a sentence with another. They will be forced to reread, to exert additional effort to work out where the pauses should have been. For example:

With three bolts two screwdrivers one hammer and a box of nails we went to the shop my Uncle Harry's that is to see what we could do with the old red BMW.

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With writing like this, readers can feel as if they're being sucked into a grammatical black hole, and put the work down. It's just not worth the extra effort.

• Every sentence has a certain rhythm to it, a certain "flow." Read a sentence aloud, and you'll naturally hear where you must pause. Commas are the written version of that pause; they slow the language and suggest a pause when need be. Removing them can send readers into a tailspin; they will plunge ahead, realizing something's amiss, but unable to stop until they've crashed headlong into the period. The rhythm of the sentence will be ruined, and on some level readers will feel it. For example:

She left the window open even though I told her not to and the cold air sent the old thermometer which was on the blink to begin with into its final decline sending the heat to 40 degrees and increasing my gas bill which was already extravagant to over \$500 for the month.

• Pauses can be necessary in the midst of dialogue. Without commas in dialogue, it reads as if a character speaks breathlessly, which can make the dialogue be interpreted differently from the way you had intended. You must carefully consider the weight of time in dialogue. For example:

"If you want me to come, if you really do, I'll be happy to."

"If you want me to come if you really do I'll be happy to."

Since this is contained within dialogue, neither of these is "wrong." It depends on how you'd like to convey your character's speech patterns. The former would be the most natural choice; the latter would be highly stylized, would indicate a more unusual speech, suggesting it is all uttered with one breath. This is fine—if deliberate. The problem comes when this is not deliberate, when writers omit commas merely because they do not have a good ear for pauses within dialogue.

• If you'd like to convey more than one significant idea in a sentence and don't use commas for separation, you run the risk—even if grammatically correct—of the ideas blurring, and of the reader missing one or more of them. Consider:

The music had a profound effect on me and the seats gave me an entirely new perspective of the theatre.

The music had a profound effect on me, and the seats gave me an entirely new perspective of the theatre.

Again, both of these examples are acceptable, and both are grammatically correct. It goes back to the issue of intention. In the former example, without the comma, you run the risk of the reader glossing over the fact that the music had a profound effect on the narrator. In the latter example, the comma forces you to pause, to take that extra beat to consider the fact that the music had a profound effect.

• Without commas, an aside or qualification can become glossed over:

She said she'd come over if it snows to help me build a fire in the fireplace.

She said she'd come over, if it snows, to help me build a fire in the fireplace.

In the latter example, it is clear that she will only come over if it snows; in the former, the aside "if it snows" is not offset by commas and thus a reader won't pause before and after it. There is a greater chance that a reader—particularly a tired one—could gloss over it. You must decide whether that chance is worth it.

• A sentence can be perfectly acceptable without commas, yet the overall intention might be ambiguous. Inserting commas can alter meaning. Consider:

In 16 days' time, the rebels will be here and we'll be ready to fight.

In 16 days' time the rebels will be here, and we'll be ready to fight.

The effect is subtle. In the former example, the intention of the sentence is to describe in summary what will happen in 16 days; in the latter example, the emphasis shifts to the fact a fight will take place (even if it had been previously in doubt). Something as seemingly minor as the placement of a comma can make all the difference.

CONTEXT

No punctuation mark acts alone; every time you decide to employ one—especially the comma, which often allows you the choice of including or omitting it—you must take into account the effect it will have on the marks preceding and following it. For instance, when you use a comma, you lessen the effect of the period and semicolon. The comma steals the limelight. It slows the reader dramatically, and thus the period no longer has such great impact.

In a sentence like this, for example, the presence of commas drastically reduces the period's power:

I went to see the doctor, the one on my corner, just for a quick visit, on my way to work.

But in a sentence like this, the period, as the only form of punctuation, wields supreme power:

I went to see the doctor on my way to work.

The comma can also take away stopping power from the semicolon and make it feel nearly superfluous:

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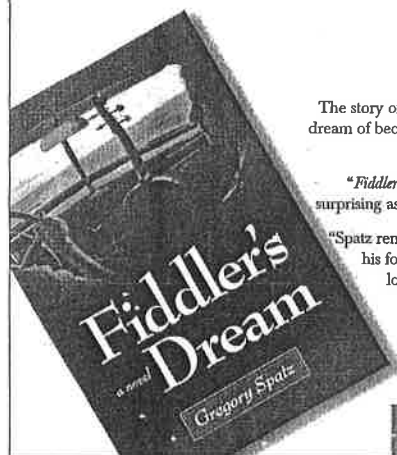
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If there is anything worse than a work bereft of commas, it is one drowning in them. "Any one who finds himself putting down several commas close to one another should reflect that he is making himself disagreeable, and question his conscience, as severely as we ought to do about disagreeable conduct in real life," said the Fowler brothers in *The King's English* in 1905. This might be a bit extreme, but their point is well taken.

It's hard for me to say it, but, after thinking it over all weekend, I realized, without any prodding, that I knew the answer all along, and that it was that I love her, I really do; but that doesn't mean she'll marry me.

But in a sentence like this, the semicolon yields its proper power:

I love her; but that doesn't mean she'll marry me.

Of course, in the above examples the content was also radically changed, and we begin to see that punctuation and content are inherently connected: certain content is not possible with certain punctuation, and certain punctuation lends itself to certain content. For example, it is harder to fill a shorter sentence with commas. Sometimes you will set out to reduce the commas and find yourself altering the content of the sentence itself.

In the above examples, it depends on your intention. If you are more concerned with the impact of the comma than the period or semicolon, keep it. What matters is that your choice is deliberate.

You must also consider stylistic consistency. You always want to offer readers as smooth a ride as possible, and this means you don't want some sentences full of commas and others bereft. You want to establish a style and stick to it as much as possible. Consider:

We walked into the forest. We hadn't gone far and we'd already lost our way. I knew this would happen. He was wrong again, he always was, and this time I had proof, and I wouldn't let him forget it, especially next time he pretended to be an expert.

You can see how the final sentence, laden with commas while the others are not, stands out, feels jarring in the context of the paragraph.

This is an extreme example. More subtle is the comma to sentence ratio. Unless you have good reason, you don't want your sentences to randomly jump from two commas to eight commas (assuming they are the same word length and their clauses are approximately the same length). Readers pick up on everything. Uneven comma-placement will work on them, and jar them rhythmically.

Of course, once you've mastered this rule, you can break it, and deliberately defy consistency. Indeed, sometimes you'll want to stray from uniformity in order to achieve an effect. For example:

She thought she could grow an orange tree, and

once an idea got into her head, there was no stopping her. She planted it that day, grinning like an idiot in the back garden, craving attention like she always did. God I hated her.

The first two sentences have two commas, while the last has none. Notice the contrast, and the impact. The lack of commas signals to the reader that the final sentence is unlike the others, and therefore significant. Notice that sentence length is also affected: the number of commas present (or absent) often has a direct bearing on sentence length.

More subtle than the number of commas per sentence is where you place commas within a sentence—in other words, the length of your clauses. Some writers have asides or digressions which average few words. Such as:

I went to the theatre, the new one, hoping to find something to distract me.

Other writers indulge their asides or digressions, allowing them to run to many words:

I went to the theatre, that elaborate concoction recently erected on the corner to the endless annoyance of my neighbours, hoping to find something to distract me.

Either is acceptable, and every sentence will have its own requirements and exceptions. But on the whole, one should become aware of where commas are placed within the sentence and the average size of clauses, and be aware of this placement within the context of the work.

WHAT YOUR USE OF THE COMMA REVEALS ABOUT YOU

Writers who overuse commas tend to also overuse adjectives and adverbs. They tend to be repetitive, won't be subtle, and often give too much information. They grasp for multiple word choices instead of one strong choice, and thus the choices they make won't be strong. Their language won't be unique. Commas are also used to qualify, offset, or pause, and writers who frequently resort to this tend to be reluctant to take a definitive stance. They will be hesitant. Their characters, too, might not take a stand; their plots might be ambiguous. It will be harder for them to deliver dramatic punches when need be, and indeed they are less likely to be dramatic. They are interested in fine distinctions, more than pacing, and are likely to write overly long books. They write with critics in

mind, with the fear of being criticized for omission, and are more likely to have a scholarly background (or at least be well read) and to consider too many angles. These writers will need to simplify, to take a stronger stance, and to understand that less is more.

There are two types of writers who underuse commas: the first are the unsophisticated writers who have not developed an ear for sentence rhythm. They are unable to hear fine distinctions, and think writing is solely about conveying information. They will need to spend time reading classic writers and especially poetry, and train themselves to hear the music of language. The second are the sophisticated writers who (like Gertrude Stein) have an aversion to commas and underuse them on purpose. There is a faction of writers who rebel against the overuse of punctuation, and more often than not they find a target in the poor comma. The danger for these writers is the rare problem of overestimating the reader. Unless readers are accustomed to reading 12th-century religious texts, they will want at least some commas, some pauses laid out for them. There is a need for marks—especially commas—to indicate ebbs and flows, pauses and pitch, division of clauses and meaning. Writers who ignore this are writers who write for themselves, not with the reader in mind. They will not be commercial writers, or plot-oriented, but proscribed, interested in nuances of style. But to a fault.

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