

Commas

Commas and periods are the most frequently used punctuation marks. Readers rely on commas to help them know when words in a sentence belong together. The placement of most commas is rule-based, but sometimes they are optional. The following rules cover most uses of the comma.

Rule 1. Use commas to separate words and word groups in a simple series of three or more items.

Example: *My estate goes to my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and nephew.*

When the last comma in a series comes before *and* or *or* (after *daughter-in-law* in the above example), it is known as the Oxford comma. Most newspapers and magazines drop the Oxford comma in a simple series. Omitting the Oxford comma, however, can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

Example: *Jean sat on a blanket by the lake with her ex-boyfriend, a pastry chef and a dog walker.*

With only one comma, the sentence is unclear:

Example: *Sleeping bags, pans, warm clothing, etc., are in the tent.*