
Lend Your Commas a Hand—or Two

Being unemployed and looking through the want ads today, I found it very disconcerting that commas are frequently misused. How, is one, supposed to get, enthusiastic about, applying for, a job, in which the, employer, doesn't even, understand, how to use, commas?

—ATTRIBUTED TO JANIS WILLIAMS

Next time you wonder whether to use one comma or two to set off a word or phrase in the middle of a sentence, imagine reaching in and lifting that word or phrase out with both hands. Does the sentence still make sense? If so, lower the text back in, and put commas in place of your hands.

For example, you need both commas in all these sentences:

Fruit flies, for example, can breed up to ten times an hour.

The TV, however, sat idle.

My pal Gerry, a baker, learned to love the sunrise.

The house that Sandee likes, the one with the striped curtains and the funny gargoyle on the second story, went up for sale last week.

The phrase *a baker* here is an example of the rhetorical device known as an appositive, a noun or noun phrase that renames the noun directly preceding it. If you can take the appositive out of the sentence and still know which noun you're talking about (we don't need *the baker* to know who Gerry is), grammarians call the appositive nonrestrictive. That means, enclose it in commas.

(Words or phrases dropped into the middle of a sentence are called parenthetical—sometimes writers drop in whole sentences

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parenthetically—after the Greek word *parentithenai*, “to insert.” Parenthesis, the insertion of an aside, is a rhetorical device that enables writers to stuff a bit of information into a sentence [using commas, parentheses, dashes, or even square brackets] to provide context or clarification

exactly where the reader needs it. Wise writers would never stuff in a whole parenthetical paragraph. Or would they?)

With certain types of words, the second comma goes missing especially often. For example, even though most style guides would call for commas on each side of the following parenthetical words (right where you’d put your hands), many writers would omit these second commas.

The plane will land in Portland, Maine, right on time.

The letter dated January 2, 1987, changed George’s life.

In some cases, as in the examples below, you can leave the comma pair out altogether, and some style guides, including *The Chicago Manual of Style*, now recommend doing exactly that.¹⁰⁹ You can use the commas if you like, though—as long as you use them both.

Macy’s, Inc., made headlines today.

or

Macy’s Inc. made headlines today.

not

Macy’s, Inc. made headlines today.

109. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 322.

Rodney, Jr., has a birthday coming up.

or

Rodney Jr. has a birthday coming up.

not

Rodney, Jr. has a birthday coming up.

Leaving out half of a pair of commas is like leaving out half of a pair of parentheses. You wouldn't do that (would you?