

"THAT'LL DO, COMMA" *

Punctuation fanatic Lynne Truss writes that commas not only “illuminate the grammar of a sentence,” but also “point up—rather in the manner of musical notation—such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone, and flow” (70). She provides guidelines for their use:

1. Commas for lists

The comma is correct if it can be replaced by the word *and* or *or*.

Ex. Students can use the computers, browse reference books, or consult with a tutor.

This is also true for lists of adjectives. If *and* or *or* would not be appropriate, don't use a comma between adjectives.

Ex. Clear empty plastic water bottles line the side of the wall.

2. Commas for joining

Commas can join together sentences with conjunctions such as *and*, *or*, *but*, *while*, and *yet*.

Ex. I enjoyed my trip to Michigan, but the cold weather made me happy to return.

However, using the comma to join together two sentences without such a conjunction is incorrect and is called a comma splice. Many writers use the comma splice, but Truss warns: “only do it if you're famous” (88). (*Please see grammar sheet on comma splices for more information.*)

3. Commas filling gaps

This is useful in tandem with a semi-colon to suggest missing words.

Ex. In old photos, Casey was dressed as Raggedy Ann; Millie, as a resentful Raggedy Andy.

4. Commas before direct speech

Ex. Doug said, “It's obvious that Caden is the son of a Women's Studies professor.”

5. Commas setting off interjections

Ex. Wait, I want to come too.

6. Commas that come in pairs

Use bracketing commas to mark both ends of a “weak interruption” within a sentence. “The commas mark the places where the reader can—as it were—place an elegant two-pronged fork and cleanly lift out a section of the sentence, leaving no obvious damage to the whole” (90).

Ex. Joshua told me that Sylvius Weiss, who composed the piece he'll play on Saturday, had his finger bitten off by another musician.

*Material taken from Truss, Lynne, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, New York: Gotham Books, 2003, Pp. 68-102.