



The fatal comma

By Richard Clark

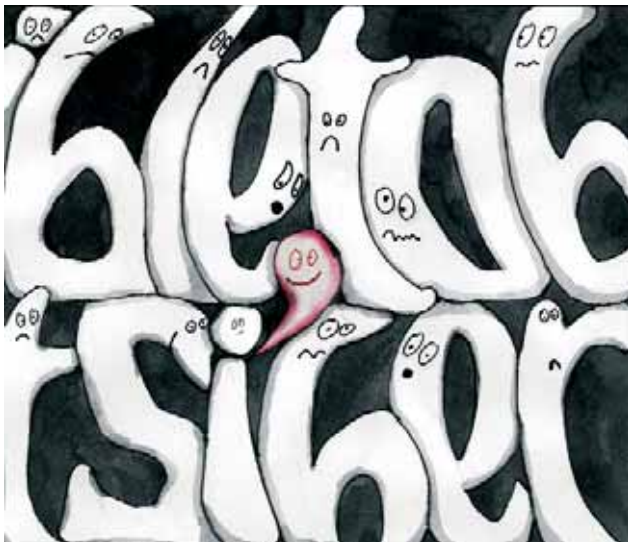
Saved from death

I am not sure if this story is true or not, but it illustrates the power of commas. Czarina Maria Fyodorovna once saved the life of a man by transposing a single comma in a warrant signed by her husband, Alexander III, which exiled a criminal to imprisonment and death in Siberia. On the bottom of the warrant the czar had written:

“Pardon impossible, to be sent to Siberia.”

Maria Fyodorovna changed the punctuation so that her husband’s instructions read:

“Pardon, impossible to be sent to Siberia.” The criminal was set free.



Quick, move it! None of us want to go to Siberia

Hanged on a comma

Sir Roger Casement was said to have been ‘hanged on a comma.’ In 1914 he sailed to Germany and enlisted German support to help Ireland gain its independence from Great Britain. This included his unsuccessful attempts to recruit Irish prisoners to form an ‘Irish brigade’ to fight against Britain and drafting an unofficial treaty with Germany to support an independent Ireland. On his return to Ireland in 1916 he was arrested and charged under the Treason Act of 1351. His barrister argued that because the mediaeval act did not contain any punctuation and was written in Norman French, that it seemed to apply only to activities carried out *within* the realm (i.e. on British soil). In translation the act read:

“If a man be adherent to the King’s enemies in his realm giving them aid and comfort in the realm or elsewhere...”

Casement’s allegedly treasonable activities were all carried out in Germany, so this argument could have saved him. Nevertheless it is fair to say that this defence was very weak! In any case, the judges claimed to find a faint *virgule* (a sort of prototype comma, signifying a short pause) after the second ‘realm’ in the original act, and so he was condemned to death by hanging. If you want to be pedantic you could say he was ‘hanged on a virgule’, but 99% of people wouldn’t know what was meant—so hanged on a comma it remains.

A costly comma

The placement of a comma in a contract between Rogers Communications Inc. and Aliant Inc. looks like it will cost Rogers dearly—an extra \$2.13 million. Rogers thought it had a 5-year deal with Aliant to string Rogers’ cable lines across thousands of utility poles in Canada for an annual fee of \$9.60 per pole. But early last year Rogers was informed that the contract was being cancelled and the rates were going up. Impossible, Rogers thought, its contract was iron-clad until the spring of 2007, and could potentially be renewed for another 5 years. The construction of one sentence in the contract allowed the entire deal to be scrapped with only a year’s notice, Aliant argued [1].

The contract states that the agreement “shall continue in force for a period of 5 years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive 5 year terms, unless and until terminated by 1 year prior notice in writing by either party.”

Rogers’ intent in 2002 was to lock into a long-term deal of at least 5 years, but the regulators with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) stated that the validity of the contract came down to the second comma in the previous sentence. Had it not been there, the right to cancel wouldn’t have applied to the first 5 years of the contract, and Rogers would be protected from the higher rates it now faces. The regulator stated that the comma in question “allows for the termination of the [contract] at any time, without cause, upon 1-year’s written notice.” Rogers intention was to shield itself from rate increases, but now it will see its costs increase to up to \$28.05 per pole. Rogers will probably have to pay \$2.13 million more than expected, based on rough calculations.

The fatal comma

Some plain words

We all know how to use commas don't we. (That was a statement, not a question!) Just in case though, the venerable Sir Ernest Gowers summarises the key issues regarding comma usage pretty well:

"The use of commas cannot be learnt by rule. Not only does conventional practice vary from period to period, but good writers of the same period differ among themselves. Moreover, stops have two kinds of duty. One is to show the construction of sentences—the 'grammatical' duty. The other is to introduce nuances into the meaning—the 'rhetorical' duty"[2].

I like this sort of attitude! Maybe this is because of my deep-rooted mistrust of grammatical 'rules' taught as taught at school. The grammar pedant can sometimes put too much emphasis on the grammatical duty of commas (see the next section) at the expense of the nuance and phraseology of the writer, and writers often just spray commas all over the place. Nevertheless, I do think that grammar rules are important, though commas are a special case for which the rules need to be bent a bit now and again.

Zero tolerance to zero tolerance

An article by John Mullan in *The Guardian* reports the views of a New York-based critic, Louis Menand, on Lynne Truss's book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* [3,4], Menand was not happy with Truss's "strange grammar." For example, the dedication mentions "The striking Bolshevik printers of St Petersburg who, in 1905, demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters." Here, Menand seems delighted to find "a nonrestrictive clause [that] is not preceded by a comma. It is a wild ride downhill from there." (In normal English this means he wants a comma after St Petersburg.) I think he has a point, but firstly I would never construct this sentence in the same way such that it needed so many commas, and secondly, the lack of a comma doesn't change the meaning of the sentence to me. To Menand, presumably, it does:

"Without that comma, the dedication is to some striking printers who made the demand, as opposed to some other striking printers who didn't. Only with a comma is the dedication to all the striking printers (as Truss presumably intends)."

This level of sophistry is beyond me, I'm afraid. I don't really like the dedication—with or without an extra comma. But, non-restrictive clauses aside (yes, I would hyphenate non-restrictive, unlike Mr Menand), if you were to read the dedication aloud with the intention of dedicating the book to the striking printers, then you would pause briefly after St Petersburg. That's as good a rule as any.

The dreaded 'Oxford'

Here we come to another example of a cross-Atlantic clash between the British and North Americans, which also illustrates the importance of not following rules slavishly. At

school in the UK (in the long-gone days when *some* English grammar was taught) we were told to put commas between items in a list of three or more items, but that a conjunction (such as 'and') took the place of a comma between the last two items. So in the UK, most people write 'red, white and blue'. In the US—with the exception of newspapers—the Oxford (or serial) comma is just about mandatory. The argument is that as this comma is sometimes necessary to remove ambiguity, there had better be one there always. The Oxford comma appears after the conjunction in this list, thus: 'red, white, and blue'. Personally, I prefer not to use an Oxford comma, but I *don't* mind using one *if it removes ambiguity*.

I'm not sure what the situation is like in the US, but here in the UK many people would rather cut off their own arm than use an Oxford comma! But if you never use an Oxford comma you can sometimes get into trouble. For example, consider:

"The sea, the perfume of wisteria, or a summer lunch: any of these revived memories of an easier time."

The removal of the Oxford comma would change the meaning such that the perfume of a summer lunch brought back memories of an easier time. Likewise, trouble lies in wait for those who always use Oxford comma. Here the 'toast, juice, ham and eggs' rule comes into play. A comma after 'ham' would make it a separate item from the eggs (which may be the case), but if ham and eggs are served together then the Oxford comma has to go."

Common sense, observation and taste

I'm a simple person. I don't know all the rules of grammar, and all the grammatical terms used to describe them. However, the words of Sir Ernest ring true, and provide some comfort:

The correct use of a comma—if there is such a thing as 'correct' use—can only be acquired by common sense, observation and taste."

The use of commas is not usually a life or death matter, though sometimes it can feel like it is. Thus, do we all need a bit more common sense, observation and taste?

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