



Let's Pause for a Moment to Consider Why Commas Matter

Video Transcript

Like the period, the comma was an invention for written texts to tell readers when to pause or how ideas and other items were to be grouped and separated.

The modern comma was invented by a printer and publisher named Aldus Manutius. He was looking for the right symbol to indicate a pause in speech in a text, and had been experimenting with the slash. He finally lowered it in relation to the line of text and gave it a slight curve. The result was the comma, from the Greek word *koptein*, which means “to cut off.”

While the comma is the most frequently used punctuation mark in English, other than the period, many people are unsure when to use it.

The primary purpose of the comma is to insert a pause in the text. It tells us to separate the previous word or phrase.

Look at this advertisement for a room that someone is looking to rent.

Image Description – a sign that says “\$900 pretty safe furnished room”

The ad would be much clearer with the addition of commas after “Pretty” and “Safe.”

Here's another example of how adding a comma can avoid confusion. This was taken from an actual road sign.

Image Description – a sign that says “slow children crossing”

We assume that the sign was meant to tell motorists that they should drive slowly and watch for all children who might be crossing the road, although it could as easily be telling motorists that slow-moving children will be crossing the road.

Sometimes, adding one comma too many can give people the wrong idea. Here is the description of a goat cheese salad.

[Goat cheese salad ingredients: lettuce, tomato, goat, cheese]

The accidental inclusion of an extra comma between goat and cheese has suddenly made the menu a lot less vegetarian-friendly.

We also use commas to separate items in a list, as well as independent clauses when a conjunction is used, as in the compound sentence:

“Alice went to the grocery store, and she bought juice, walnuts, and cream cheese.”

Commas have many other uses as well. For example, we use them stylistically to set apart phrases that are removed from the rest of a sentence.

[Sheila, reconsidering her options, did not want to go to the movie.]

We also use commas to set off introductory phrases like this one.

[Reading over her notes, Julie realized she missed an important detail.]

In its uses, however, the purpose of the comma remains constant. It serves to introduce a pause in a sentence or to separate items and phrases.

About this transcript:

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