



Oxford comma

The Oxford comma refers to the rule of putting a comma after each item in a list before the last item preceding the word *and*. For example, “I brought pens, pencils, and erasers,” rather than “I brought pens, pencils and erasers.”

Since U.S. newspapers usually disregard the rule, apparently to save space, it is common for a lot of people to also make the mistake. APA follows the rule. It’s also called the *Harvard comma* from the house style of the Harvard University Press, but the more general term is *serial comma*.

Simon and Schuster’s Handbook for Writers (7th ed.) warns “Never use a comma before the first, or after the last, item in a series, unless another rule makes it necessary.

- No The gym was decorated with, red, white, and blue ribbons.
- No The gym was decorated with red, white, and blue, ribbons.
- Yes The gym was decorated with red, white, and blue ribbons.” (Troyka, 2005, p. 416)

The main reason using the Oxford comma is a smart idea is that it avoids confusion. For example, if a menu lists the sandwiches of the day as “tuna, roast beef, ham and cheese,” one would not know if four sandwiches or three were offered. Ham and cheese might be one selection or it might intend to mean a ham sandwich and a cheese sandwich. Another example is if Uncle George’s inheritance was divided equally between his nieces Charlotte, Alice and Sarah, one might interpret that as Charlotte gets one half and Alice and Sarah (as a set) get the other half. The Oxford comma would assure that each niece received one-third of the total sum.

Michael Quinion (World Wide Words website, 2001) offers two final examples:

“He studied Roman history, international politics and economics” it is not obvious whether *international* refers only to *politics* or also to *economics*. Putting the serial comma in removes that doubt. In practice, an alert writer will spot the potential problem and can often write around it.

Perhaps the best argument for the serial comma is that apocryphal book dedication: “To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.”