A SAMPLING OF CURRENT COMMA USAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many students in college freshman English classes find themselves in a sort of comma jungle, wondering whether they should hack out commas ruthlessly or add still more. Their present instructors may make corrections that are different from remembered high school rules or those of other schools. Worse still, each quarter a new instructor may make corrections that are different from the previous instructor's. This situation unfortunately makes both for insecurity in the student and for student lack of faith in the instructor.

It is not surprising that the student meets with variation in instruction, since there is no one rigid all-purpose comma rule, and since each instructor has learned in turn from other and different instructors.

But if variations can be looked at, and then accepted with flexibility, a more understandable approach to that fluctuating symbol, the comma, may be made. The need for such an approach led to this investigation.

Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to look at current comma usage both as it was recommended by the latest handbooks and as it actually appeared in a sampling of several types of magazines customarily seen by freshman students. This study was suggested in consultation with Dean[1] of the Montana State College English Department.

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[1]Howard Dean, author of Effective Communication, the text used in the Montana State College freshman English course "Oral and Written Communication."

Procedure

The method of attack employed the following steps:

1. A survey of standards in sixteen recent style books and texts
2. A survey of editorial policies in seven types of magazines
3. An intensive sampling of one issue of each of four magazines which had no definite editorial policies

Each step was followed by analysis of material located and a compilation of this material in tables.

Limitations

Several limitations restricted this investigation. Obvious limits were those of time and size of study. These limitations did not allow the possibility of breaking down into subcategories clauses, phrases and introductory words for further comparison. Another limitation lay in the fact that source materials were not weighted comparatively as to value, so that the evidence was quantitative rather than qualitative.

But within these limitations, it was believed that this investigation might bring together findings that could be used as resource information in the teaching of freshman English, making available the status of current comma usage in a way that could be helpful to teacher and student alike.

As the first step in attempting to determine this status, the next chapter reviews text and style book standards with respect to the comma.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF STANDARDS ON COMMA USAGE

Style manuals and handbooks, besides giving specific rules, also made some general statements about punctuation and comma standards in the four categories of clarity, styles, trends and judgement.

General Statements About Punctuation

Clarity. Text and style books have agreed for a long time that the purpose of the comma was to make the meaning clear. The United States Government Printing Office Style Manual stated of punctuation in general: "(1) if it does not clarify the text it should be omitted and (2)...the sole aim should be to bring out more clearly the author's thought."[1] Over twenty years ago Webster's had:"the comma is used primarily as a mark of separation to make clear the grouping of words, phrases and clauses..."[2] In 1957 Platt wrote in the latest edition of the American College Dictionary that " the aims of writers and publishers of all sorts are clarity and suitability to the general style."[3]

Styles. The commonly used handbooks and style manuals of today have also agreed on the comma used for suitability to the general style. The description in Webster's 1936 edition did not change in the 1956 edition:" the open system in ordinary descriptive and narrative writing and a close system in more compact,involved composition."[4] The latest American College Dictionary

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[1]U.S.Govt.Style Manual, p. 111.

[2]Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1936, p. 1267.

[3]Harrison Platt, Jr., American College Dictionary, p. xxxiii.

[4]Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1956, p. 1149.

made a division between heavy, formal punctuation and light, informal punctuation. Platt showed that heavy punctuation was used in closely written material:

> In philosophical writing, thoughtful political or economic analysis... ...On the other hand, the aim of the mystery story, the news magazine, the light novel, is rapid effortless reading...They need little punctuation and would be merely slowed down if more were put in.[5]

Waldhorn and Zeiger also differentiated between the close and open style:

> Two kinds of pointing practice are in vogue: conservative, close or formal punctuation, which prefers to use all marks not expressly forbidden; and liberal, open or informal punctuation which prefers to omit all marks not definitely required.[6]

Trends toward less punctuation. An increasing tendency toward less punctuation is pointed out by texts and style books. Variously referred to as "open," "light," "liberal," or "informal," this tendency had been building a good many years. In 1957 Shurter cited a survey of punctuation used in the editorial pages of the New York Times showing that the "number of commas decreased almost 50% in 60 years...[7] Shurter commented that "the modern trend is to omit punctuation wherever it is not necessary for clarity; ...open punctuation may be considered the most up-to-date method."[7] The U.S. Govt. Style Manual in both 1949 and 1953 referred to "the trend toward less punctuation."[8] McCrimmon in 1950 noted that "the modern tendency, especially

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[5]Platt, op.cit., p. xxxiii.

[6]Waldhorn and Zeiger, English Made Simple, p. 79.

[7]Robert L. Shurter, Written Communication in Business, p. R44.

[8]U.S.Govt. Style Manual, 1949, p. 127.

in informal writing, is to keep punctuation to a minimum."[9] Wooley recently remarked that "modern practice is to use less rather than more punctuation in narrative and expository prose."[10] According to these sources, a general trend toward less commas seemed indicated.

Use of judgement. Judgement as necessary for classifying a piece of writing in order to decide about comma usage was also discussed in standard sources. Platt presented the difficulty of classification:

> The difficulty is not so much in deciding what mark to use in a recognized and well understood situation...but in recognizing a situation that will benefit by punctuation. In the great variety of English sentences...these situations are not always clear-cut and require judgement on the writer's part.[11]

The Chicago Manual of Style noted of the comma that "there are a few rules governing its use that have become obligatory. Aside from these, the use of the comma is merely a matter of good judgement, with ease of reading as the end in view."[12] But the word "merely" is too simple. Good judgement is the crux of the whole matter. The college freshman in writing must exercise judgement first in recognizing a situation as needing or not needing punctuation, and must next exercise judgement in using the correct punctuation if it is needed. The instructor, in making corrections, must then exercise judgement as to the individual situation in each paper. These various judgements are not easy.

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[9] James McCrimmon, Writing with a Purpose, p. 364.

[10] Edwin C. Wooley, College Handbook of Composition, p. 254.

[11] Platt, op.cit., p. xxxii.

[12] Chicago Manual of Style, p. 94.

There was general agreement among standard sources not only as to judgement necessary for choosing where a comma was needed, but also as to judgement necessary for choosing which of the two basic styles of punctuation, heavy or light, should be used. It was also generally agreed that there was a present trend toward light punctuation, and all sources agreed on the basic use of the comma for clarity. There was also general agreement on some specific rules, as the Chicago Manual of Style pointed out.

Agreement on Rules

There seemed to be general agreement on comma usage in three specific areas: to avoid ambiguity, with nonrestrictive phrases or clauses, and in interrupting constructions.

Ambiguity. All texts examined seemed to agree that the comma should be used to avoid ambiguity. In the following example, without the comma it would seem as if he had eaten the dog.

When he had eaten, the dog disappeared.

Nonrestrictive phrases or clauses. All texts examined seemed to agree that the added phrase or clause which did not restrict the central meaning of the sentence should be set off with commas, while a restrictive clause should not be set off with commas.

Nonrestrictive: My niece, who is six, almost never cries.
Restrictive: Dogs that bark loudly are not apt to bite.

Interrupting constructions. All texts examined seemed to agree that the comma should be used in interrupting constructions such as parenthetical words and phrases and those in apposition.

Parenthetical: The sky, it suddenly seemed to him, was leaden.

Apposition: Dr. Black, our doctor, was very tall.

The texts examined seemed to agree on comma usage in these three areas. But there were disagreements in other areas.

Areas of Disagreement

The principal areas of disagreement in comma usage concerned the use of the comma before the conjunction in a compound sentence, the use of the comma following an introductory clause, the use of the comma following introductory words or phrases, the use of the comma before a conjunction connecting the last two items of a series, and the use of the comma between the month and year.

Compound sentence. A comma may or may not be used before the conjunction in a compound sentence. Examples:

The thieves ran, and the dogs followed.
The thieves ran and the dogs followed.

Introductory clause. A comma may or may not be used following an introductory clause. Examples:

While we found no one in the house, we did find someone in the barn.
While we found no one in the house we did find someone in the barn.

Introductory words or phrases. A comma may or may not be used following introductory words or phrases. Examples:

To see infinity in a grain of sand, one needs vision rather than sight.
To see infinity in a grain of sand one needs vision rather than sight.

In a series. A comma may or may not be used before the final conjunction in a series. Examples:

Riots, massacres, and strikes
Riots, massacres and strikes

Month and year. A comma may or may not be used between month and year. Examples:

June, 1958
June 1958

Length of clauses seemed to affect disagreement as to use of the comma in compound sentences and following introductory clauses, and the great variety of introductory words and phrases seemed to affect disagreement as to comma usage in that area. Radical disagreement was also found as to comma usage before the conjunction in a series and between month and year.

All these disagreements are shown in Table 1, which chronologically presents text and style book comma usage standards in each of these five areas.

Interpretation of Table

First column. In the case of the compound sentence, all texts that were examined previous to 1953, with the exception of McCrimmon, made the comma mandatory before the conjunction. In 1953 the U.S.Govt. Style Manual also made the comma mandatory, but Dean's text of the same year and all subsequent publications shown in the table made the comma optional if the clauses were short. With but one exception, the pattern from 1950 to 1953 was the required comma. But from 1953 to 1958, without exception, the comma has been optional. Of the fourteen sources cited, only three have made the comma mandatory, and the latest of these is 1953. Eleven out of fourteen called the comma optional, and these eleven occurred in the five years from 1953 to 1958.

TABLE 1. TEXT AND STYLE BOOK COMMA USAGE RULES IN FIVE AREAS

Text and Style Books	Compound Sentence	Introd. Clause	Introd. Phrase	In a Series	Month and Year
1958: College Handbook (Wooley)	omit if short	usually	usually	preferred	yes
1958: English Made Simple (Waldhorn and Zeiger)	omit if short	optional	optional	optional	optional
1957: American College Dictionary	omit if short	optional	optional	optional	
1957: Written Communication (Shurter)	omit if short	omit if short		preferred	
1957: Complete Secretary's Handbook (Doris)	omit if short	omit if short	most	preferred	
1956: Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary	omit if short	optional	optional	divided usage	divided usage
1956: Business English (Janis)	omit if short	yes	usually	advisable	no
1955: Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers	omit if short	omit if short	omit if short	optional	no
1954: Form and Style in Thesis Writing (Campbell)	many now omit	yes		best usage	
1953: Effective Communication (Dean)	omit if short	omit if short	usually w. var.	optional	
1953: U.S.Govt. Printing Office Style Manual	yes		yes	yes	no
1950: Century Collegiate Handbook (Greever)	yes	omit if close	optional	preferred	
1950: Chicago Manual of Style	yes	yes	yes	omit if close	yes
1950: The Secretary's Handbook (Taintor)		generally	yes	preferred	yes
1950: Manual of Form (Dugdale)		yes		yes	yes
1950: Writing with a Purpose (McCrimmon)	sometimes	yes	optional	optional	

Second column. In the case of the comma following an introductory clause, the pattern was not quite so clear. Three out of five 1950 publications made the comma mandatory. Taintor qualified with "generally" and the Century Collegiate Handbook omitted the comma if the clause was short. Dean in 1953 also omitted the comma if the clause was short, but Campbell in 1954 made the comma mandatory. The next year the Prentice Hall Handbook again omitted the comma if the clause was short, but in 1956 Janis once more made the comma mandatory. This see-sawing progress became optional through 1956 with Webster and on through 1957 and 1958, although Wooley in 1958 veered again to the mandatory with "usually." Of the fourteen sources cited, five made the comma compulsory, and these all dated between 1950 and 1956. Taintor in 1950 used "generally" and Wooley in 1958 "usually." Eight, then, allowed the comma as optional but seven preferred it.

Third column. In the case of the comma following introductory words and phrases, the pattern was somewhat like that of the introductory clause, but not parallel. McCrimmon in 1950 made comma usage optional, as did the Century Collegiate Handbook of that year. But Taintor and the Chicago Manual of Style the same year called the comma mandatory, as did the 1953 U.S. Govt. Style Manual. The Complete Secretary's Handbook held that most used it. On the other hand, also in 1953, Dean placed the comma as usual with variation, as did Janis in 1956 and Wooley in 1958. The 1955 Prentice Hall Handbook omitted the comma if the phrase was short, and the 1956 Webster and the 1958 English Made Simple called it optional. Altogether then, three out of eleven citations made the comma mandatory, three qualified use as usual, one as most, while six allowed the comma as optional. Seven out of eleven preferred the comma.

Fourth column. In the case of a comma before the conjunction in a series there did not seem to be a chronological factor. In 1950 Dugdale made the comma mandatory. In 1950 Taintor and Greever likewise preferred the comma. However, also in 1950, McCrimmon called it optional and the 1950 Chicago Manual of Style said to omit if close-knit. In 1953 the U.S.Govt. Style Manual called for a mandatory comma, while in the same year Dean made it optional. Campbell called a comma best usage in 1954; Prentice Hall called it optional in 1955; Business English called it advisable in 1956. In 1956 Webster said usage was divided. In 1957 the Complete Secretary's Handbook and Written Communication in English preferred the comma, but in the same year the American College Dictionary called it optional, as did English Made Simple in 1958. On the other hand, also in 1958 the College Handbook of Composition preferred the comma. Totalling the score, there were two compulsory commas in 1950, six preferred commas ranging from 1950 to 1958, and six optional commas also ranging from 1950 to 1958. Counting the two mandatory commas with the six preferred, the preferred commas seemed to have a slight edge of eight over the six optional out of the fourteen sources cited.

Fifth column. In the case of a comma between month and year, in 1950 there were three sources for the compulsory comma. The 1953 U.S.Govt. Style Manual prescribed no comma, as did the 1955 Prentice Hall Handbook and the 1956 Business English. Also in 1956, Webster called usage divided. The 1957 Complete Secretary's Handbook and the 1958 College Handbook both cited the mandatory comma. On the other hand, the 1958 English Made Simple called the comma optional. Out of ten sources, five were for the comma, three against, and two optional. Again, as in the fourth column series, use of the comma

seemed to be preferred.

Summary of table. The comma used before the conjunction in the compound sentence seemed in the last five years to have become optional according to the length of the clause. Eight texts recommended optional use of the comma after an introductory clause according to length, but with almost as many, seven, favoring compulsory comma usage. Six sources recommended optional use of the comma after introductory words and phrases according to length and close relationship, while one more, seven, preferred comma usage. As for the use of the comma before the conjunction in a series as well as between month and year, in both cases in the last five years it seemed to be about half for and half against. It would seem that there was a distinct trend in texts and style books toward optional use of the comma in compound sentences. However, comma usage was more evenly divided following introductory clauses, phrases and words; and the last comma in a series and the comma between month and year seemed to have adherents equally divided between the preferred and the optional.

Chapter Summary

At the beginning of this chapter some general statements agreed on by handbooks concerning punctuation were listed. It was pointed out that the purpose of the comma was to clarify. If needed for clarity, the comma was to be used according to the particular style of writing. Styles were divided into two kinds:(1) compact, involved composition, and (2) ordinary narrative and descriptive writing. Close, heavy, formal, conservative punctuation was considered suited to the first division; open, light, informal, liberal

punctuation was considered suited to the second. A trend was noted toward the lighter type of punctuation. Judgement was considered necessary to classify a piece of writing in order to decide its style and whether punctuation was or was not needed according to that style.

Besides agreeing on general statements, the texts examined were found to agree on three specific rules: (1) the use of the comma to avoid ambiguity, (2) the use of the comma with nonrestrictive clauses and (3) the use of the comma in interrupting constructions. Disagreement was found in the following five areas: (1) in the use of the comma before the conjunction in a compound sentence, (2) in the use of the comma following an introductory clause, (3) in the use of the comma following introductory words or phrases, (4) in the use of the comma before a conjunction connecting the last two items of a series, and (5) in the use of the comma between month and year. These disagreements were charted in table form and some conclusions drawn. These conclusions showed definite trends in texts and handbooks toward rules for light punctuation in compound sentences. On the other hand, comma usage following introductory clauses and phrases depended a great deal on their length and close relationship. Usage was evenly divided between use of the comma or its omission in a series and between month and year.

Comma usage as prescribed in texts was presumably related to comma usage as found in magazines, and the necessity to inquire as to editorial policies concerning such possible relationships led to the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

MAGAZINE EDITORIAL POLICIES

After looking at comma usage standards found in texts and style books, the next step in this investigation was to inquire into editorial policies on comma usage in several types of current magazines.

Magazine Selection

Seven types of magazines were selected for study. Three were chosen because of their use in the Montana State College freshman English course, "Oral and Written Communication," a subscription to Harpers being assigned with the text for the first two quarters of the course, Time and The Nation being included among assigned readings in the third quarter of the course. Two of the magazines, The Saturday Evening Post and Reader's Digest, were chosen because of their mass-circulation familiarity to freshman college students. The final two magazines, Business Week and Scientific American, as specialized types also familiar to many students, were suggested by the Montana State College English Department head. June 1958 issues were selected to make the data concurrent. All articles in each issue, excluding fiction, were chosen for survey so that material would be equivalent. Inquiries were then made of the editorial staff of each magazine concerning editorial policies.

Inquiries to Magazines

Letters of inquiry were sent to the editorial offices of each of the

seven magazines. A sample of these letters will be found in the Appendix. Replies were received from six of the seven. Business Week's managing editor sent a copy of their style book, and Time's editorial office sent six pages of comma rules their copy desk followed. Harper's replied from their editorial rooms that they followed the Chicago Manual of Style on most questions of grammar and punctuation, but added that "We tend to be permissive, however, toward the author's personal style if he seems reasonable." Reader's Digest's Educational Department replied:"Because of the nature of our magazine, containing condensations of articles from many magazines, no specific style either literary or grammatical is set. We assume the punctuation made in the original." The Nation's managing editor replied that there were no specific policies on comma usage. An associate editor of The Saturday Evening Post replied:

> Here at the Post we ride herd pretty loosely on our commas, working on the principle that their sole function is to help get the writer's meaning across to his readers. In practice, that entails a few such obvious things as a comma before "but" and "for" as conjunctions , but not as prepositions. If a sentence has to be reread before its meaning becomes apparent, the chances are that a well-placed comma or two will clear up the muddiness.

A reply was not received at the time of writing from Scientific American.

Summary of Replies

From the six replies received, it was found that two magazines, Time and Business Week, had definite editorial policies concerning comma usage. It was found that Harper's followed the Chicago Manual of Style, although tending to be permissive. The Nation, Reader's Digest and The Saturday

Evening Post had no definite editorial policies on comma usage, although the Post's managing editor seemed to favor an "obvious" use of the comma before "but" and "for" as conjunctions.

The next chapter goes on to show current comma usage in the five areas of disagreement previously found among standard sources, as this usage was exhibited either according to editorial policy as ascertained by inquiry, or in an intensive sampling of one issue of each of the magazines which did not have a definite editorial policy concerning such usage.

CHAPTER IV

COMMA USAGE IN MAGAZINES

Three of the seven magazines to which inquiries were sent replied that they followed definite editorial policies as to comma usage. Business Week's managing editor sent their style book and Time's editorial office sent six pages of comma rules their copy desk followed.[1] Harper's editorial rooms replied that they followed the Chicago Manual of Style on most questions of grammar and punctuation, tending to be permissive toward the author's personal style.

Specific Editorial Policies

Business Week's style book began with a general statement: "The comma indicates separation of words or thoughts, just as the hyphen indicates joining. Use the comma whenever it will prevent confusion and help the reader grasp the meaning quickly." This statement was followed by three situations in which a comma should not be used, beginning with the qualification " unless necessary to the sense." Ten situations were then given in which the comma should be used, which included the five areas selected for investigation in this study. These situations were preceded by this statement:

> Whether necessary to the sense or not, do use commas in the following cases:
>
> To separate the principal clauses of a compound sentence (a sentence of which both parts are independent clauses). Ajax mousetrap ran a deficit this year, but next year looks better.

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[1] Time pointed out that they usually do not give this material general circulation and requested that it be used merely in connection with this study.

To set off a subordinate clause preceding the principal clause of a complex sentence. When this happened, the company decided to expand.

To set off introductory words and phrases. This week, Ford announced its plans. After five years, he is still there.

To separate the elements of a series. Include a comma before the final "and,""nor," or "or." John, Alice and Mary. Neither snow, nor sleet, nor gloom of night.

To separate the year from the rest of a date. April, 1954, is the month to watch. Note that a comma goes both before and after the year.

In Business Week's style book listing it was noted that none of these five uses were given as optional.

The pages on comma rules followed by Time's copy desk listed twenty-three chief uses of the comma as well as eight situations in which a comma should not be used. The total of thirty-one included the five areas for investigation of this study. No introductory general statement preceded these.

A comma is used between two coordinate clauses of a compound sentence joined by a coordinating conjunction (and,or,but). Example:
A good deal of Time Out For Ginger is thoroughly aimable, and a fair...
Exception:
If the two clauses are short and concise, with no internal punctuation, a comma is not needed. Example:
He could and he did.

An introductory subordinate clause of some length should be separated from the following principal clause by a comma. A short introductory clause closely related in meaning to the following clause need not be followed by a comma unless the juxtaposition causes confusion in meaning. Examples:
If Taft had been a man to harbour grudges, there were plenty he could...
When he got home, he found the sheriff waiting for him.

Time separated the category of introductory words and phrases into three sections, and also listed a fourth in the eight situations in which a comma should not be used.

An introductory participial phrase should be set off with a comma.
Example:
Thundering warnings on the Senate floor, Knowland leaped to the ...

Conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs used in such a way as to break the continuity of a sentence should be set off with commas. Examples:
Moreover, he changes his mind ...
Nevertheless, I think ...
Thus they lost the game ...

Introductory prepositional phrases (usually used adverbially) if short or restrictive in nature, do not require a comma afterwards; but if the phrase is long, or if it has its own internal comma, a comma is needed. Note the variations:
On one vital point Ike has no worries ...
In sum, this is what happened ...
In Tokyo he met General MacArthur ...
In his two-bedroom, $175-a-month Berkshire Hotel apartment, Knowland ...
In 1949 he spoke 115 times in the Senate on ...
For his part, he decided to remain ...

Do not use a comma:
after the standard introductory phrases "last week,""this week," "next week,""at week's end," etc.: Last week top police officials ...

Nouns used in a series do not require a comma before the and or or in the final item of the series if the items are balanced in structure. Examples:
For dinner she wanted chicken, rice and green peas.
But if there exists the possibility of the last two items of a series becoming confused in meaning, or if the last item is different in structure from the preceding items, a comma should be placed before the final item:
For dinner she wanted chicken, rice, and green peas fresh from the garden.

Do not use a comma:
between a month and year:
November 1957

Harper's editor wrote that they followed the Chicago Manual of Style on most questions of grammar and punctuation, adding that "We tend to be permissive, however, toward the author's personal style if he seems reasonable."

The Manual of Style opened with a general statement, from which an excerpt has been given on page 5 of this study. The full statement follows:

The comma indicates the smallest interruption in continuity of thought or sentence structure. There are a few rules governing its use that have become obligatory. Aside from these, the use of the comma is merely a matter of good judgement, with ease of reading as the end in view. It is well to follow the author's punctuation in cases where there is a choice.

Use a comma between the two parts of a compound sentence when a conjunction is used.
The bus made an impressive fire, and young men began ...
Bombs were exploding near by, and there was ...

Introductory clauses and adverbial phrases were combined:

Adverbial phrases and long subordinate clauses preceding a main clause (adverbial or adjectival) are set off by a following comma.
When he arrived at the railway station, the train had gone.
As the next train was not due for two hours, he decided ...
While he regretted his failure to meet his friend, he didn't ...
Because of the heavy snowfall, Kenny was unable to ...
Since you are ready, we may as well ...
If that is correct, they have no ...

A further differentiation in phrases was made:

An introductory participial or gerundive phrase, especially when containing an explanation of the main clause, should be set off with a comma.
Being asleep, John did not hear ...
Exhausted by a day's hard work, he slept ...
Judging from his appearance, he has not ...
In measuring a type page, the type ...

A still further differentiation in phrases was made, combined with words, and an exception was pointed out:

Use comma punctuation to set off conjunctions, adverbs, connecting particles, or phrases that make a distinct break with continuity of thought, summarizing what has preceded, enumerating what follows, or indicating an antithesis in thought to what precedes.
Indeed, there was ...
Moreover, he did ...
Nevertheless, he consented ...
On the other hand, it is ...
However, we shall

Exception:
Do not use a comma with such words when the connection is logically close and structurally smooth enough not to call for any pause in reading:
Therefore I say unto you ...

Also listed were rules for comma use in series and between month and year.

Put a comma before "and," "or," and "nor," connecting the last two elements in a sequence of three or more.
Tom, Dick, and Harry are all here.
It may be made of copper, silver, or gold.

Separate month and year and similar types of divisions by a comma.[2]
In November, 1941, the blow fell.
Exception:
Do not use a comma between month and year in display lines.

Since Harper's editor wrote that they tended to be permissive in following the Manual of Style, a spot check of the June Harper's was made for any variations. The comma used before the conjunction in a series seemed to be consistent through the issue, but in the other four categories variations from the Manual did appear.

In an editorial italic comment there was a compound sentence without a comma.[3]

His paper won a Pulitzer Prize this year for meritorious public service and Mr. Ashmore himself received another for his ...

In one article there was a subordinate clause preceding a main clause not set off by a comma.[4]

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[2] Manual of Style footnotes that Modern History omits comma in date.

[3] "The Easy Chair," Harper's, June, 1958, p. 10.

[4] Joseph C. Clark, "Notes on Political Leadership," Ibid., p. 23.

When I came back to Philadelphia I could afford ...

The same article omitted the comma between month and year.[5]

January 1952

Another article omitted the comma following a phrase.[6]

On the other hand to depend on the wool clip or other ...

Comparing the three magazines, Business Week advocated the comma in a compound sentence; Time advocated the comma with an exception if the clauses were short and concise; Harper's, following the Manual of Style, advocated the comma while remaining permissive.

Business Week used a comma to set off an introductory clause. Time used a comma for an introductory clause of some length but omitted the comma if clauses were short and closely related. Harper's used a comma for introductory clauses, but remained permissive.

Business Week made no exception to using a comma for introductory words and phrases. Time used a comma in an introductory participial phrase, after conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs that would break up the continuity of a sentence, and if an introductory prepositional phrase were long. But Time did not use a comma if the introductory phrase were short or restrictive, and specifically omitted a comma after "the standard introductory phrase 'this week,' etc."...This was in direct contrast to Business Week, which gave "this week" followed by a comma. Harper's used commas to set off adverbial, participial or gerundive phrases, as well as conjunctions, adverbs, connective

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[5]Clark, "Notes on Political Leadership," Harper's, p. 27.

[6]Grogan, "Australia," Ibid., p. 64.

particles, or phrases breaking continuity of thought. An exception was made when the connection was logically close and so smooth as not to call for any pause. Harper's remained permissive in following these rules.

In a series, Business Week used a comma. Time on the contrary did not, unless there would be confusion in meaning. Harper's followed the Manual of Style in using a comma but remained permissive.

Business Week used a comma between month and year. Time did not. Harper's used a comma but was permissive about its omission. These similarities and variations can best be seen in Table 2.

TABLE 2. MAGAZINE EDITORIAL POLICIES ON COMMA USAGE IN FIVE AREAS

Areas	Business Week	Time	Harper's
Compound sentence	Comma	Comma unless short	Comma but permissive
Introductory clause	Comma	Comma unless short	Comma but permissive
Introductory words	Comma	Comma for participial and long prepositional phrases and conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs breaking continuity No comma with "this week"	Comma for adverbial, participial or gerundive phrases, for conjunctions, adverbs and particles breaking continuity No comma if close and smooth
In a series	Comma	No comma	Comma but permissive
Month and year	Comma	No comma	Comma but permissive

Business Week, Time and Harper's followed a definite set of rules on comma usage, and these could be examined. But since The Nation, Reader's Digest, The Saturday Evening Post and Scientific American had no such sets of rules, a different technique was necessary to determine their practices as to comma usage. Accordingly, in these last four magazines one complete June 1958 issue of each was used as a sample of comma usage for that magazine. Within each issue a survey of all articles (excluding fiction) was made for comma incidence in the five areas of comma usage under investigation in this study. All sentences in these areas were listed for analysis.

Magazine Sampling

An intensive survey for comma usage was made of the seven articles in the June 28th Saturday Evening Post. Of fifteen compound sentences found, fourteen or 93% used a comma and one or 7% did not. Of eighteen introductory clauses, sixteen or 89% used commas and two or 11% did not. Of thirty-seven introductory words and phrases, thirty-two or 86% used commas and five or 14% did not. Of seven examples of a series, one or 14% used a comma (to avoid confusion) and six or 86% did not. Of two examples of month and year, two or 100% used commas.

A similar survey was made of the four articles, six editorials and four reviews in the June 28th Nation. Of twelve compound sentences found, nine or 75% used commas, three or 25% did not. Of fifteen introductory clauses, fifteen or 100% used commas. Of sixty-eight introductory words and phrases, fifty-three or 77% used commas and fifteen or 23% did not. In three examples of a series, three or 100% did not use commas. In two examples of month and year, two or 100% did use commas.

A similar survey was made of the eight articles and five departments of the June Scientific American. Of the twenty-three compound sentences found, nineteen or 83% had commas, four or 17% did not. Of the sixty-seven introductory clauses, sixty-five or 97% had commas and two or 3% did not. Of one hundred and eighty-six introductory words and phrases, one hundred or 54% had commas and eighty-six or 46% did not. Of the fourteen examples of a series, fourteen or 100% did not use commas. The only example found of month and year had one comma or 100%.

A similar survey was made of the thirty-five articles and seven departments in the June Reader's Digest. Of the fifty-five compound sentences found, thirty-five or 64% used commas and twenty or 36% did not. Of one hundred and eighteen introductory clauses, ninety-seven or 82% used commas, twenty-one or 18% did not. Of two hundred and sixty-three introductory words and phrases, two hundred and twelve or 81% used commas, fifty-one or 19% did not. Of forty-six examples of a series, two or 4% used commas and forty-four or 96% did not. Of two examples of month and year, two or 100% did not use commas.

Taking all four magazines together, a total of seventy-seven compound sentences or 73% had commas, and a total of twenty-eight or 27% did not. A total of one hundred and ninety-three introductory clauses or 89% had commas, and a total of twenty-five or 11% did not. A total of three hundred and ninety-seven introductory words and phrases or 72% had commas, and a total of one hundred and fifty-seven or 28% did not. A total of three series or 4% had commas, but a total of sixty-seven or 96% did not. A total of five or 71% had commas between month and year, but a total

of two or 29% did not.

Roughly then, three-quarters of the compound sentences examined used commas. Considerably more than three-quarters of the introductory clauses used commas. Almost three-quarters of the introductory words and phrases used commas. Almost three-quarters of the examples for month and year used commas.

On the other hand, in the series comma usage was reversed, just four per cent short of a complete reversal, toward no comma before the conjunction. Table 3 shows these individual and total percentages.

TABLE 3. JUNE 1958 MAGAZINE COMMA USAGE PERCENTAGES IN FIVE AREAS

Areas	%	SatEvePost	Nation	Sci.Am.	Rea.Di.	Average
Comp. Sent.	%commas	93	75	83	64	73
	%none	7	25	17	36	27
Intr. Clause	%commas	89	100	97	82	89
	%none	11	0	3	18	11
Intr. Words	%commas	86	77	54	81	72
	%none	14	23	46	19	28
Series	%commas	14	0	0	4	4
	%none	86	100	100	96	96
Month and yr.	%commas	100	100	100	0	71
	% none	0	0	0	100	29

Chapter Summary

All seven magazines, the three with editorial policies and the four without such policies, were compared in each of the five areas of disagreement selected for study.

Business Week alone advocated a comma without exception in compound sentences. Time made an exception if clauses were short and concise, and Harper's was permissive. In the four magazines sampled, The Saturday Evening Post used commas in 93% of compound sentences, Scientific American had commas in 83%, The Nation in 75%, Reader's Digest in 64%.

Business Week advocated a comma without an exception following an introductory clause. Time made an exception if clauses were short and closely related in meaning. Harper's was permissive. In the four magazines sampled, The Nation had commas following 100% of the introductory clauses, Scientific American 97%, The Saturday Evening Post 89%, Reader's Digest 82%. Here the Nation joined Business Week in having no exception to the comma.

Business Week advocated a comma without exception following introductory words and phrases. Time differentiated between different kinds of phrases for comma usage, as did Harper's. The Saturday Evening Post used commas in 86% of introductory words and phrases, the Reader's Digest in 81%, The Nation in 77%, Scientific American in 54%.

Business Week and Harper's used a comma without exception in the series. Time did not use a comma unless there would be confusion without it. The Nation and Scientific American did not use commas in 100% of the series, Reader's Digest in 96%, The Saturday Evening Post in 86%,(the 14% representing one case where there would have been confusion without it).

Business Week used a comma between month and year. The Nation, The Saturday Evening Post and Scientific American also used a comma in 100% of the cases found. Harper's used a comma but remained permissive to the individual author's style. On the other hand, both Reader's Digest and Time used no comma.

The record of comma usage in the magazines seemed to be that of variation with each other.

The next chapter considers possible conclusions in the light of these findings.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The principal result of this investigation into current comma usage has been the discovery of widely existing variation.

Variation

A review of recent standard sources comprising grammars, texts, dictionaries, style manuals and handbooks resulted in finding a variety of basic comma rules within these authorities during the last eight years.

Great and small variety in practice of comma usage was also revealed in intensive examination of seven types of current magazines.

Of the five areas of specific comma usage disagreement under investigation, no single rule was followed with complete unanimity in either all texts or all magazines examined.

Trend Toward Light Punctuation

Another result of this investigation has been the discovery of an emphasis in the most recent standard sources on a trend toward light (less) punctuation. Although the province of this study did not include a survey of earlier material to compare with current usage, in the five areas of specific comma usage disagreement, this trend is most clearly shown in one of these areas in the increasing omission of the comma before the conjunction in a series. Since the province of this study also did not include a survey of fiction, it may only be guessed that the trend toward light punctuation may be even more evident there. In any case, whether the agreed-on

trend toward light punctuation is more or less evident, it is very evident that variations exist.

Implications of Study

For students. An understanding of current comma usage variety should be helpful to the student. Certain rules followed in high schools or other colleges may have seemed at variance with those used by instructors at Montana State College or even between instructors here. It should be understood that comma usage is not a case of past loyalties or present dictation, but a permissive situation for the exercise of judgement. If some standard sources prefer one usage and other equally standard sources prefer another, and if it is shown that practice in some current magazine prefers one usage and another magazine as reputable another usage, the whole concept of the comma will have lost some of its rigidity. It will also not be a case of comparing one instructor to the possible detriment of another, but of realizing that there is a variety of personal preferences to be made by individuals as well as by magazines and texts.

Admittedly it might be simpler if there were definite rules with which all authorities were in agreement. But there is no such agreement. Instead there is a variety of usage. This variety should be utilized to the best advantage.

Underlying this variation the basic use of the comma for clarity remains. Relieved of changing arbitrary rules, the student could utilize the released energy to concentrate on communicating ideas as clearly as possible, using the comma wherever he judged it necessary to ensure this clarity.

For instructors. For the Freshman English instructor, the obligation would be to present early in the course a brief idea of the variety of comma usage now found both in standard texts and in current magazines. This presentation would start with the basic concept of comma usage for clarity, and then go on to the kinds of variation that presently exist. Pairings on the board could be given to illustrate the choices, and discussion invited as to possible reasons for choosing either. Unnecessary use of the comma could also be discussed and dealt with as lacking in logic.

In marking, the instructor would feel obliged to allow either the comma or its omission in situations where currently either is used. The instructor might note a preference on a student's paper, but could not feel justified in marking off in such a situation.

With less rigidity in comma marking, more emphasis should be put on removing unnecessary commas which had no logical reason, and on putting in commas only as directed toward clarity for the reader.

The result could be at least some disentanglement for student and teacher alike from the thorny comma problem, with the focus continuing to be directed where it really belongs, on ideas communicated as clearly as possible.

The basic use of the comma for clarity is of course far from a new concept. The use of the comma for clarity goes back as far as the comma itself goes back. The comma for clarity has been emphasized over the years in dictionaries, handbooks, style manuals and texts. However, the findings of this investigation, that alternatives of comma usage exist among current standard sources and magazines to an extent that makes rigidity superfluous, force the writer once again to comma use for clarity, shifting though the sands may sometimes be.

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APPENDIX

MONTANA STATE COLLEGE
BOZEMAN

ARTMENT OF ENGLISH

June 20, 1958

Mr. T.B. Crane, Senior Copy Editor
Business Week
McGraw-Hill Building
330 West 42nd Street
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Crane:

I am doing a graduate study on present trends in the use of the comma. Having been employed as an instructor teaching Freshman English in courses using issues of your magazine, I am writing to you in regard to this study.

If you have any specific editorial policies on comma usage in your proofreading, I would very much appreciate the privilege of receiving a copy of these policies.

Enclosed is a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Thank you for this assistance.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Sidney Whitt

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