

The Oxford (serial) comma: Should there be a comma before “and” or “or in a series?

There’s a long-standing argument about whether a comma belongs after the last element in a series (or “item in a list”), before the “and” or “or.”

The clothesline was laden with red, green, blue and yellow shirts?

OR

The clothesline was laden with red, green, blue, and yellow shirts?

Are there three kinds of shirts, or four? Are all the shirts a single color, or are some of them blue and yellow?

This *serial comma* is also known as *the Oxford comma*; while it is technically “optional,” it was the punctuation used by the Oxford University Press. Traditionally, writers were advised against using it; because of the “and” or “or,” it was considered redundant (and still is by many).

In more recent times, however, it is more common to use the Oxford comma, and we recommend it. Why? Because to not use the comma can create confusion; using it never does. Usage should be consistent, so if we use it in situations that need it to avoid confusion, we should always use it!

Be careful to treat each element of the series as a single unit, and punctuate accordingly. If all the shirts are a single color, the sentence should look like this:

The clothesline was laden with ¹red, ²green, ³blue, and ⁴yellow shirts.

If, in fact, the shirts are blue and yellow, then the sentence should look like this:

The clothesline was laden with ¹red, ²green, and ³blue and yellow shirts.

Elements in a series can be more complicated than single words; whole clauses can be “listed,” too. The same confusion can be created if there is no Oxford comma—no comma before the “and” or “or” before the last element.

Here’s a great example of this. The sentence comes from an article in *The New York Times*:

In this campaign, Mr. McCain’s free-wheeling relationship with the press was badly strained, he was accused of pandering to conservatives and party strategists said he damaged the prospects of other Republicans on the ballot.

Did Mr. McCain really pander to conservatives and to party strategists? On first read, most readers will read it this way, and then be confused when the rest of the sentence doesn’t make sense. Without the Oxford comma, it appears that “conservatives and party strategists” is a compound object of the preposition “to.” But that isn’t what the writer means. “Party strategists” is the subject of the next clause, “party strategists said...” With a comma appropriately placed after the second element in the series, this would be evident:

In this campaign, ¹Mr. McCain's free-wheeling relationship with the press was badly strained, ²he was accused of pandering to conservatives, and ³party strategists said he damaged the prospects of other Republicans on the ballot.

See below for more sentences that illustrate the need for the serial or Oxford comma:

1 How many rail lines?

In addition, between 1851 and 1854 the Erie, Baltimore and Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York Central rail lines finished completion.

Are there two railroads, one called the Pennsylvania and one called the New York Central? Or is there one railroad called the Pennsylvania and New York Central? The first is true: they are two different rail lines, so there are four elements in the series. The sentence should look like this:

In addition, between 1851 and 1854 the Erie, Baltimore and Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York Central rail lines finished completion.

2 Stripping?

In the example below, taken from the blog “Grammar Geek”,¹ not using the Oxford comma creates the impression that some former world leaders had an, er, sideline occupation:

We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin.

Punctuated like this, it appears that “JFK and Stalin” is an *appositive*—a kind of modifier—and that the two men are strippers! Using the Oxford comma corrects that perception and clarifies that all were invited to the party. (Some party!)

We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin.

3 How many fingers am I holding up?

This example, from a book reviews blog, presents a math problem:

There are four books in the series so far — Biographies, Fables and Encyclopaedias and the one reviewed here, A Brief History of Diaries.

Either one comma is missing and $4 = 3$, or two commas are needed (and a conjunction eliminated) and 4 really does equal 4. It seems reasonable to include the Oxford comma before the last item in the series—but it leaves us wondering why four books are indicated but only three titles offered:

There are four books in the series so far —¹Biographies, ²Fables and Encyclopaedias, and ³the one reviewed here, A Brief History of Diaries.

Math and grammar will align if serial commas are included in all the proper places:

There are four books in the series so far —¹Biographies, ²Fables, and ³Encyclopaedias, and ⁴the one reviewed here, A Brief History of Diaries.

¹ See a pretty funny cartoon version of this example at the blog; <http://grammargeek.tumblr.com/post/10332484608/oxfordcomma>

4 Is someone selling Wal-Mart?

This company sells everything from food, apparel, and appliances to jewelry, furniture, and Super Wal-Mart stores include a pharmacy and an oil-changing shop.

In this sentence, there's more to question than whether one should use the Oxford comma. There is an error here, but as in the sentence about Senator McCain, above, the reader has tripped over the meaning before the error is evident. It sounds like "this company" sells Super Wal-Mart stores! In this case, the writer has mistaken the "and" before "Super Wal-Mart Stores" as the conjunction before the least item in the series, and has used an Oxford comma. But it's not; it's a coordinating conjunction separating the two independent clauses combined in this sentence. It can't be both.

This company sells everything from ¹food, ²apparel, and ³appliances to ¹jewelry, ²furniture, and Super Wal-Mart stores include a pharmacy and an oil-changing shop.

jewelry,
furniture,
and
Super Wal-Mart stores include...

In this case, two "ands" are needed: the one that is already there, to separate the clauses, and another before the last element in the series. (Note: Because this correction leaves *a pair* (two elements) rather than a series, be sure to remove that comma:

This company sells everything from ¹food, ²apparel, and ³appliances to ¹jewelry and ²furniture, and Super Wal-Mart stores include a pharmacy and an oil-changing shop.

jewelry
and
furniture

This company sells everything from...AND Super Wal-Mart stores include...