Good Writing Practice

Syntactic punctuation distraction

Comma: Omission

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Introduction

Comma omission often occurs after a sentence-orienting syntactic unit (Examples 1, 2, and 3) and between some coordinated syntactic units (Examples 4 and 5).

Example 1: Orienting conjunctive adverb
(Introduction section: objective)
Therefore it was important to obtain normative test data for adolescents.

Revision
Therefore, it was important to obtain normative test data for adolescents.

Notes
Therefore followed by a comma (which segregates and emphasises) functions adverbially as an inter-sentence (i.e., conjunctive) marker between its sentence and the previous contiguous sentence.

Example 2: Orienting prepositional phrase
(Methods section)
For the patient group data were recorded from review (chart and x-ray), questionnaire, and neurologic tests.

Revision
For the patient group, data were recorded from review (chart and x-ray), questionnaire, and neurologic tests.

Notes
Without the comma, data could be misread as the object in the prepositional phrase (for patient group data). The prepositional phrase for the patient group in an orienting position avoids modifier clutter (by distancing one of the two modifiers of were recorded).

Example 3: Orienting adverbial clause
(Results section: preliminary interpretation)
If the data had not been analysed for heterogeneity the results would have been the same as those of previous studies.

Revision
If the data had not been analysed for heterogeneity, the results would have been the same as those of previous studies.

Notes
The punctuational demarcation of an adverb clause preceding an independent clause (a transposition from a strictly modificational position) is conventional, whereas the punctuation of an adverb clause that follows an independent clause is not.

Although a predicative adverb clause (i.e., after an independent clause) beginning with whereas, denoting a contrast, is often demarcated by a comma, demarcation seems arbitrary for demarcating the following meanings: reason (marked by because), condition (marked by if or when), objective (marked by so that). However, the justification could be for segregational emphasis.

Example 4: Independent clauses of a compound sentence
(Methods section)
A lipid fraction was incubated with 6% ethanolic KOH and released fatty acids were extracted with hexane.

Revision
A lipid fraction was incubated with 6% KOH, and released fatty acids were extracted with hexane.

Notes
A frequent usage of the comma is between independent clauses of a compound sentence connected by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or). In the example, a comma is necessary before and to indicate that release fatty acids is the subject of the second independent clause and not the object of with. Therefore, to maintain consistency the comma should always be used between independent and-connected clauses of a compound sentence, even when such subject identification is not necessary.

Example 5: Coordinated noun phrases in series
(Results section: results statement)
Treatment with indomethacin inhibited the formation of prostaglandin E, thromboxane A or 6-keto PGF.

Revision
Treatment with indomethacin inhibited the formation of prostaglandin E, thromboxane A, or 6-keto PGF.

Notes
To a non-expert, the last item 6-keto PGF could be a synonym of the penultimate item thromboxane A. However, the presence of a comma minimises such misreading.

If an and replaces or, misreading the last two items as synonyms is unlikely. But another type of misreading is possible.

There is controversy whether a comma is necessary before and (the serial/Oxford comma). Often the comma is omitted before and, because the comma is considered to be an equivalent of and. However, in some listings, the comma before and is necessary (my parents, Albert Einstein, and Madame Curie). Because the comma after my parents, functions as a weak colon, without the second comma, Einstein and Curie are my parents. Although this sentence pattern is infrequent, if even one exists in a journal article the serial comma should be routinely used for constancy.
Revision

1. Conjunctive adverb independent clause
   Conjunctive adverb, independent clause
   Comma

2. Prepositional phrase independent clause
   Prepositional phrase, independent clause
   Comma

3. Adverbial clause independent clause
   Adverbial clause, independent clause
   Comma

4. Independent clause and independent clause
   Independent clause, and independent clause
   Comma

5. Noun phrase, noun phrase or noun phrase
   Noun phrase, noun phrase, or noun phrase
   Comma

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This is called the hash, pound, or number character. A hashtag is a keyword or set of keywords that is preceded by the # character. It is used in social media to create a thread of conversations around a specific theme or topic conveyed in short texts or microblogs. It is commonly used in Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, etc.

A dictionary of most common hashtags can be found at https://www.hashtags.org/definition/~h/.

For your info, EMWA is compiling a list of standardised hashtags for our social media use.

This is called the "at" sign or symbol. The @ sign is part of email addresses and social media user names ("handles"). Our EMWA handles are as follows: @Official_EMWA (Twitter), @EMWA (LinkedIn), and @europeanmedicalwritersassociation (Facebook)

The two most important keys on your keyboard