

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic punctuation distraction

Comma: Omission

Michael Lewis Schneir, PhD

Professor, Biomedical Sciences
Ostrow School of Dentistry of University of
Southern California, Los Angeles, CA
schneir@usc.edu

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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).

After a sentence-orienting syntactic unit

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.

Between some coordinated syntactic units

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,

SECTION EDITORS



Wendy Kingdom

info@wendykingdom.com



Amy Whereat

amy.whereat@speaktthespeech.fr

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.



Tabular Summary

Comma omission	Revision	Punctuation addition
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

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.

The two most important keys on your keyboard

@ 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)