

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic punctuation distraction

Comma: Over-usage

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Introduction

Comma over-usage probably results from a tendency to pause and emphasise. However, such intuitive punctuation is counter-productive to the coordination of sentence core constituents, the intent of which is to cohere syntactic units of similar grammatical function, such as noun subjects Example (1) and verb predicates Examples (2 and 3).

Between noun subjects

Example 1

(Methods section)

The polyclonal goat antibody actin (#sc-1615), and polyclonal rabbit antibody Sam (#sc-333) were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology.

Revision

The polyclonal goat antibody actin (#sc-1615) and polyclonal rabbit antibody Sam (#sc-333) were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology.

Notes

As a test of comma over-usage, if all the modifiers are eliminated from the sentence, most writers would not place a comma between *actin* and *Sam*

in the skeleton sentence *Actin and Sam were purchased.*

Between parallel verbs

Example 2

(Methods section)

Fertilised hen eggs were routinely incubated, and staged.

Revision

Fertilised hen eggs were routinely incubated and staged.

Notes

There is no reason to pause, to segregate for emphasis, or to mark for sequentiality (readers know that the actions are sequential not simultaneous).

Between nonparallel verbs

Example 3

(Introduction section)

The Introduction section is no exception, and would be improved by the usage of subheadings.

Revision 1

The Introduction being no exception would be improved by the usage of subheadings.

Revision 2

The Introduction, being no exception, would be improved by the usage of subheadings.

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Revision 3

Being no exception, the Introduction would be improved by the usage of subheadings.

Notes

Is a comma necessary between coordinated verbs that are of a different type? *Is* (a linking verb) and *would be improved* (the passive voice of a transitive verb) are not parallel. Such non-parallelism and the over-used comma may cue that coordination may not be the most effective sentence pattern. The comma probably is a signal (maybe an apologetic one) by the author to acknowledge the non-parallelism and to de-coordinate.

In Revision 1, the first verb phrase *is no exception* is syntactically reduced to the participial phrase *being no exception*. By default, the verb phrase *would be improved* is emphasised.

In Revision 2, comma segregation of “being no exception” causes its emphasis.

In Revision 3, transposition to the sentence orientation position followed by comma segregation provides context without the subject-to-verb disruption in Revision 2.

Tabular Summary

Comma over-usage example	Revision	Action
Between coordinated noun subjects		
(1) Subject, and subject	Subject and subject	Comma deletion
Between coordinated verbs		
(2) Subject verb A, and parallel verb B	Subject verb A and parallel verb B	Comma deletion
(3) Subject verb A, and non-parallel verb B	(1) Subject participial phrase verb B	Verb A into participial phrase
	(2) Subject, participial phrase, verb B	Addition of commas
	(3) Participial phrase, subject verb B	Participial phrase translocation to sentence orientation position and comma segregation