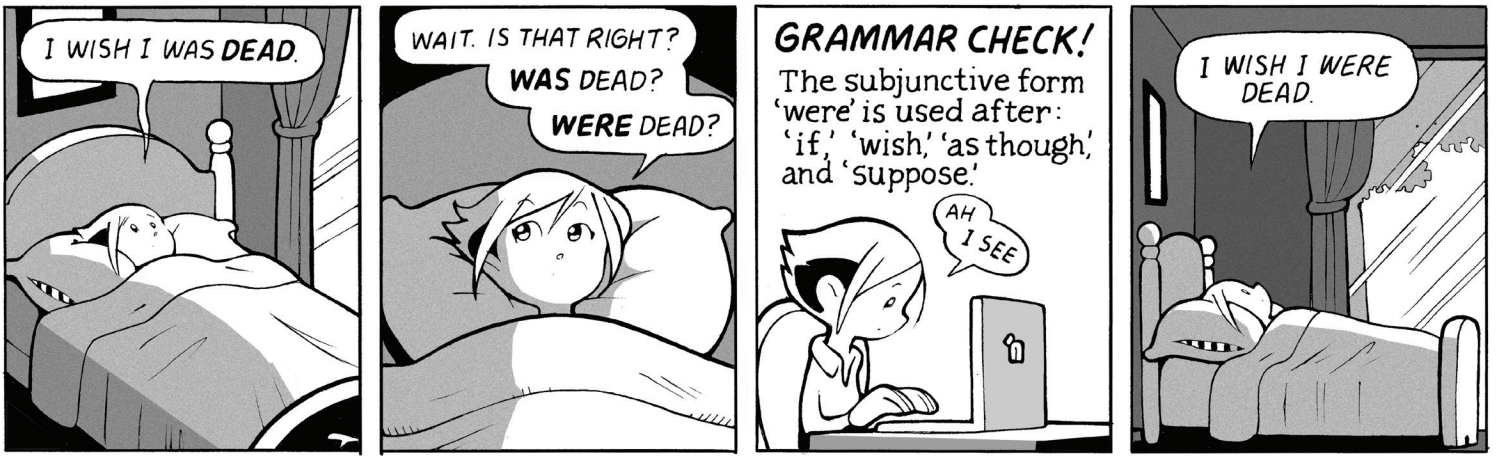
Making peace with the serial comma: Why one editor changed her style



If you are an editor like Danielle Taylor, you understand the obsession with grammar that can keep a person awake at night, as portrayed in the above cartoon, "Grammar Anarchist," by Tatsuya Ishida. It took years, and even some soul-searching, but Taylor finally decided to embrace the serial comma, despite what the AP Stylebook says.

BY DANIELLE TAYLOR

About a year and a half ago, I went through an editor's version of an identity crisis.

Journalism school unceasingly drilled the scripture of AP style into my head. These teachings clarified that publishing outlets could develop a house style guide to supplement the holy tome, some of the commandments AP style outlined were held as time-tested wisdom of the ages and not to be questioned. Foremost among these was the edict against the serial comma, also known as the Oxford comma. The pertinent entry reads:

"Use commas to separate elements in a series, but do not put a comma before the conjunction in a simple series: The flag is red, white and blue. He would nominate Tom, Dick or Harry."

But since the end of 2012, I've been doubting whether this is really the best guidance to follow for the rest of my professional life. And I feel like a heretic saying this, but I think I've finally gone over to the other side.

To clarify, the serial comma is the comma used before the final item in a list (e.g., in "red, white, and blue," the serial comma is the one after "white"). Its use is a style choice. AP style bars its use for a simple series, but Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style" calls for it, as do the Oxford University Press and the Harvard University Press. Mignon Fogarty, the Web's esteemed "Grammar Girl," is also in the comma camp. National Geographic and Outside magazines, two of my favorite publications, use it as well.

You may be thinking, "What's the big deal? If it's not technically wrong one way or the other, why does it matter?"

First, you have to understand that editors are, by nature, a little bit insane. We hem and haw over how a writer might have intended for a sentence to be interpreted so we can punctuate it accordingly, chuckle when we see references like "…my wife Kelly…" (as the lack of commas around the appositive indicates the speaker has more than one wife), and wonder what traumatic event might have occurred in the childhood of a writer who uses multiple spaces between sentences. (I disagree with but respect the consistent use of two, but varying between three and five? Come on!). Second, we see our work for consistency as a way to improve or sustain the professional quality of the publications we edit, so to us, decisions like this are significant.

Toward the end of 2012, I began developing a house style guide for the magazine I edit. Although we didn't have any standard in place for whether to hyphenate words like "nonprofit" or start websites in our text with http:// or www., the editor was steadfast in his dedication to using the serial comma. This was the first place I worked that used it, so getting into the rhythm of applying it consistently was awkward. After the editor left I successfully made the official switch to the AP-sanctioned omission of the serial comma and I was back in what had been familiar territory.

That's when I began to notice how frequently I needed to keep the comma in for clarity's sake. For example, my company's three guiding pillars for how parks and recreation can impact communities are "conservation, health and wellness, and social equity." Leaving out the comma after "wellness" would result in a string of words connected only by conjunctions, which gets tiring quickly and makes it seem like "health" and "wellness" are disparate items instead of two complementary ideals united under one banner. AP style makes concessions for complex sentences, but it occurred to me that we were making exceptions for

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A yearling bear follows a sow in the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary.

Again we saw a variety of bears.

Camera shutters clicked rapidly in the rain as we looked eye-to-eye with more than 20 different grizzlies.

We boarded the zodiac again that evening for short final tour and returned to where we'd seen a sow and two cubs earlier. Near the forest we spotted a dark colored head in the grass. It was Barney, the Khutzeymateen's dominant male which hadn't yet been sighted that season. The bear was too far away to photograph, but close enough to wish us farewell.

That night while drifting off sleep, the distinctive call of a loon reminded us we were in a spectacular place where we had just enjoyed intimate encounters with grizzlies. ■

Want to go?

Visit Sunchaser Charters at grizzlytour.com or email sunchase@citywest.ca.

Prices for 2015 per person including all taxes and park fees
Three day trip: $1650.00
Four day trip: $2200.00
Five day trip: $2750.00
Six day trip: $3300.00,

All trips are limited to a maximum of four to six people. Space is limited throughout the summer season. Accommodations are basic with one shared bathroom.

Getting there

Vancouver, British Columbia, is the gateway to the Khutzeymateen. From there, head to Prince Rupert and depart to the Khutzeymateen by boat or by float plane charter. It is necessary to spend a night in Prince Rupert both departing and returning. Air Canada Jazz and Hawk Air provide air service to Prince Rupert.

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things like this about half the time. Slowly, I started questioning my upbringing, and in time, I've come around to the notion that actually, maybe, for me, it's better to use the damn comma.

The serial comma is not without its faults. In late 2013 Britain's Sky News posted the following headline: "Top stories: World leaders at Mandela tribute, Obama-Castro handshake and same-sex marriage date set." Serial comma advocates noted its omission could lead readers to think that the leaders of the U.S. and Cuba set a date for pending nuptials. But when the Oxford community used this example to clamor loudly for unilateral use, James Taranto of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board responded, writing, "Years ago when we worked on the Journal's op-ed desk, we received a submission from a writer who argued that the Oxford comma should be universally adopted so as to avoid ambiguities. We wrote back: 'My boss, Max Boot, and I find your argument unpersuasive. Do two or three people find it unpersuasive?'" Touché.

When I first proposed the idea of developing a house style guide at my magazine, my former managing editor told me that at one of her previous jobs, the house style guide had a partial quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson emblazoned across the top: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." I was a little offended at first, thinking she found my attempt to bring some order and consistency to our editorial content to be the mark of a small-minded person. But as I thought about it more, I realized it was probably a self-deprecating poke at the stubbornness of editors who blindly and unflinchingly follow their own rules without being willing to understand that sometimes, exceptions are merited.

And that seems to be the key. Editors exist to polish up the rough edges of writers' prose and to smooth the reading process for the audience. Even if it's technically in accordance with our established style, we don't want a reader to stumble over a sentence and have to read it several times to determine its meaning.

Now if I could just get the hang of the subjunctive mood (e.g., "If I were to move to Fiji" versus "If I was to move to Fiji") and consistently applying hyphens to adjectival phrases that could be interpreted as compound modifiers (mountain biking trails? mountain-biking trails?), I'd be set for the rest of my career. ■

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