

Oxford Comma

Introduction to the Oxford Comma

The **Oxford comma**—also known as the serial comma, series comma, or Harvard comma—is defined as the comma after the penultimate item in a list of three or more items, before “and” or “or.” Stated in another way, it’s the use of a comma before the conjunction in a list of three or more items.

Examples

- I went to the store to buy cherries, raisins, and oranges for the fruitcake that I’m making.
- We can get pizza, noodles, or sandwiches for lunch.

Background

The Oxford comma is often attributed to Horace Hart, who was Oxford University Press’s printer from 1893 to 1915. Referenced for the first time in Hart’s 1905 style guide, the Oxford comma would remain nameless for another 24 years, until 1978 when it was referred to as the serial comma (Sutcliffe, 1978).

Purpose

The Oxford comma is a comma placed after the penultimate—or second-to-last—term in a list (just before the conjunction) when writing out three or more items. The purpose is to clarify relational ambiguity between members of the list.

Consider the example depicted on the right, titled “Why I Still Use the Oxford Comma.”

When written **with** the Oxford comma, the sentence reads “I had eggs, toast, and orange juice,” indicating that there are three separate items: “eggs,” “toast,” and “orange juice.” This sentence captures the intended meaning of the writer/speaker.

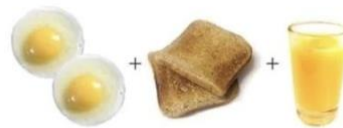
When written **without** the Oxford comma, the sentence reads “I had eggs, toast and orange juice,” indicating that the last two items at the end of the list (“toast and orange juice”) go together, while the first item (“eggs”) is separate. This sentence makes the intended meaning unclear.

WHY I STILL USE THE OXFORD COMMA

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WITH:

I had eggs, toast, and orange juice.



WITHOUT:

I had eggs, toast and orange juice.



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Sentences that Do and Don't Require an Oxford Comma

Examples of sentences that do and don't require an Oxford comma are provided below, along with an explanation for why the punctuation is necessary or not.

Sentences that Do Require the Oxford Comma

The sentences below **do** require the Oxford comma because they list three (or more) items:

- The recipe called for milk, eggs, flour, sugar, and butter.
- In 2022, a study written by Sarah Lee, Christina Darvish, and Wesley White was published in *Science Today*.
- For their contest prize, they had to choose between a free spa day, a gift certificate, or a ticket to the local movie theater.

Sentences that Don't Require the Oxford Comma

The sentences below **don't** require the Oxford comma because they list only two items:

- My favorite colors are purple and green.
- Would you rather go to the dance or to the movies tonight?

Activity: Practice Using the Oxford Comma

Activity Part 1: Identify which Sentences Require the Oxford Comma

Examine the three sentences below and determine whether each sentence requires an Oxford comma or not. *Sentences will be written without any punctuation.*

1. I am available Monday Tuesday Thursday or Saturday next week
2. Can you grab a pen and paper for me
3. We will need spackle sandpaper and paint to repair the wall

Activity Part 1: Answer Key

1. Yes, the sentence requires an Oxford comma since it has three or more items joined by a conjunction ("or").
2. No, the sentence does not require an Oxford comma since it's only listing two items.
3. Yes, the sentence requires an Oxford comma since it has three or more items joined by a conjunction ("and").

Activity Part 2: Add Commas to Identified Sentences

Now that you've identified which sentences need an Oxford comma, add in all the punctuation to the sentences with a focus on the Oxford comma.

- a. I am available Monday Tuesday Thursday or Saturday next week
- b. We will need spackle sandpaper and paint to repair the wall

Activity Part 2: Answer Key

- a. I am available Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday next week.
- b. We will need spackle, sandpaper, and paint to repair the wall.

References

Hart, Horace (1983). *Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-212983-3.

Sutcliffe, Peter H. (1978). *The Oxford University Press: An Informal History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. ISBN 978-0-19-951084-9.

[Trayf] (2012, January 22). *Why I Still Use the Oxford Comma* [Online forum post].

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