

# ZEN COMMA



**David Bowman**

Top Posts from the Zen Comma Blog, Edition 1

<http://zencomma.wordpress.com>

## **Table of Contents**

[Introduction: What Do Commas Do?](#)

[2 Most Common Comma Errors](#)

[A Serial Comma Creates Confusion](#)

[Comma with But Also](#)

[Commas and Quotation Marks](#)

[Complicated Sentences Clarified by Commas](#)

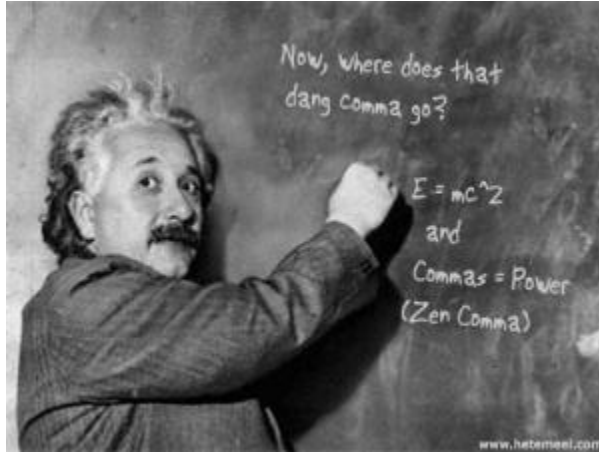
[Funny Sign with Comma Error](#)

[Implied Subject Determines Comma](#)

## What Do Commas Do?

I have been receiving quite a few questions about the basic purpose of the comma. For example, one Twitter follower asked simply, “Can you explain what commas are for?”

Twitter isn’t really the place for lengthy discussions, so I responded “Commas are used to separate meaningful units in sentences.” Here’s a more lengthy response about the value of commas and how they are used, taken from the introductory sections of *Zen Comma*.



### Commas are confusing

The final stage of the writing process is proofreading: correcting any errors in spelling, punctuation, word usage, and format. Roughly 75% of what I do while proofreading clients’ documents is correct commas.

When I teach community writing courses at the university, I ask the students, “What’s the number one thing that confuses you about punctuation and grammar?” In every class, someone says “Commas,” and about half of the students nod in agreement.

Commas confuse most people. Unlike other types of punctuation, they are used in so many ways. The purpose of this book is to show you how to use them correctly.

If you want to write clearly and professionally, you need to use commas correctly.

### What commas do

Commas are visual clues that have only one purpose: Help the reader separate parts of sentences into discrete, meaningful messages.

A sentence may have multiple parts. Each part has some meaning that we are trying to communicate. We combine those parts to write a sentence that has a single message. In most cases, we identify those parts by separating them with commas. This helps the reader find them and understand the overall message of the sentence.

And that, ultimately, is why we use commas: Help the readers understand the ideas we want to communicate.

#### Do commas matter? Yes!

As you will see throughout this book, where we put the commas, and where we leave them out, can **change the meaning of a sentence**.

When we’re writing, we already know what we want to say. The reader doesn’t. Our job, therefore, is to help the reader understand our meaning.

And that means the commas have to be right.

## 2 Most Common Comma Errors

If I had a penny for every comma error I correct, I would make...let's see...about 50 cents a day. Ok, at a penny per error, that doesn't add up to much. Over a year, though, that's around 18,250 comma errors. Yes, they are that common. Granted, I'm an editor, so I read a lot of texts that have not yet been edited or proofread. I get paid to do such things as fix comma errors.

Here are the two most common comma errors I fix. (Your grammar checker probably won't catch them, but don't worry. I'll help you learn how to use commas correctly.)

### Two Most Common Comma Errors

**Error 1.** Comma between two independent clauses. *Zen Comma* Rule D tells us to **put a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses**.

(An independent clause has a subject and predicate and can serve as a complete sentence)

Example: The program was a success [comma] and the director recognized the team's efforts.

The common mistakes are 1) to leave out the comma, and 2) to put the comma after the conjunction. As seen from the example, the comma goes before the conjunction.

**Error 2.** Comma after introductory adverbial phrases and clauses. *Zen Comma* Rule G tells us to **put a comma after introductory clauses and phrases**.

(An introductory adverbial phrase or clause is before the main subject and describes the predicate, the main verb, in some way)

Example: When John received the letter [comma] he reached for the bottle.

The common mistake is to leave out the comma. As seen from this example, the comma falls between the introductory clause and the subject.

### Why This Matters

It's important to know when to use commas. When we avoid (or correct) these two errors, we produce correct writing that decreases the possibility for reader misunderstanding. Commas improve clarity, and clarity is our most important goal.

## A Serial Comma Creates Confusion

I subscribe to streaming movies on Netflix. I look for comma errors to discuss on this blog. Join those two behaviors and you get this post.

I was looking at the movie description for *Merlin and the Book of Beasts*, and I came across this poser:

**Now it's up to King Arthur's daughter, Avlynn and Merlin to reclaim the city.**

This blurb poses two questions:

1. Who is Avlynn?
2. How many people will reclaim the city?

### First problem: Who is Avlynn?

If Avlynn is King Arthur's daughter, then Avlynn is in apposition to King Arthur's daughter, meaning Avlynn equals King Arthur's daughter. If that is the case, then this description is missing a comma.

An appositive needs to be separated from the rest of the sentence with commas, both before and after. (This follows *Zen Comma* Rule J: Separate non-restrictive appositives with commas.) Thus, if Avlynn is King Arthur's daughter, then the sentence should read as follows:

**Now it's up to King Arthur's daughter, Avlynn, and Merlin to reclaim the city.**

But if we put in that second comma, we create even more confusion because that comma looks like a serial comma, making Avlynn a separate person from King Arthur's daughter.

Maybe Avlynn is not King Arthur's daughter, and the sentence doesn't need an additional comma because Avlynn is not an appositive for King Arthur's daughter. If we assume the writer knows about commas, then this is the case.

But we still don't know who Avlynn is.

### Second problem: How many people will reclaim the city?

If you've been reading this blog, you know that I espouse the serial comma (the comma before *and* or *but* in a series, which follows *Zen Comma* Rule B: Use the serial comma). This sentence doesn't have a comma before *and*, which makes me think this is not a series. Or that the writer doesn't use the serial comma.

Based on the lack of a comma after Avlynn (discussed in Problem 1), we could assume that Avlynn is not King Arthur's daughter, so this movie description seems to indicate that three people will reclaim the city: (1) King Arthur's daughter, (2) Avlynn, and (3) Merlin. If this is the case, the sentence has a series but didn't use the serial comma.

An unlikely interpretation is that the entire expression "Avlynn and Merlin" is in apposition to King Arthur's daughter, meaning the daughter has two names: Avlynn and Merlin. If this is the case, then only one person will reclaim the city.

Now we have:

**One person:** King Arthur's daughter, who is named both Avlynn and Merlin. Not likely.

**Two people:** (1) King Arthur's daughter (who is named Avlynn) and (2) Merlin. If so, the writer

forgot a required comma.

**Three people:** (1) King Arthur's daughter, (2) Avlynn, and (3) Merlin. This seems most likely if we assume the writer doesn't use the serial comma.

## Conclusion

This description is confusing.

## Solution

I didn't see the movie, and probably won't. Even so, I'm going to assume Avlynn is the name of King Arthur's daughter. If we leave the sentence alone, but put in the comma required by the appositive, we get this:

**Now it's up to King Arthur's daughter, Avlynn, and Merlin to reclaim the city.**

This might be interpreted to mean three people, not the assumed two, because the comma after Avlynn seems like a serial comma.

The solution is to completely revise the sentence and avoid the confusing comma. One possibility is as follows.

**Now it's up to Merlin and King Arthur's daughter, Avlynn, to reclaim the city.**

This revision gives us two people (which I assume is correct) and has commas in the correct places. With the *and* after Merlin, the sentence cannot be interpreted as a series of three names.

## What's the Point?

The point is commas clarify the meaning in most cases, but when comma rules overlap, such as the serial comma and the commas for appositives, they may create confusion. The solution is not to break comma rules. The solution is to revise the sentence.

A careful writer stays alert to such possibilities and makes sure the sentence means what is intended.

## Comma with But Also

Commas confuse many, maybe most, people. One comma use that catches many writers is the comma with *but also*.

First, let's take a look at how *but also* is used. Then we'll take a look at commas with *but also*, or, more specifically, the lack of commas. Finally, we'll take a look at a case where we use the comma with *but also*.

### Not Only . . . But Also

The phrase *not only . . . but also* is a correlative pair. Two common correlative pairs are *either . . . or* and *neither . . . nor*. Together, the two parts of a correlative are required for the phrase to be complete. They are used as a set. This means, briefly, that if you use *not only*, you must also use *but also*.

### No Comma with But Also

As with all correlative pairs, we don't use a comma before the second part of the pair. For example, the following sentence does not need a comma before *but also*.

He was sure not only that the harvester was full but also that he was too tired to empty it.

As you can see from this correct example, we have no comma before *but also*. This follows *Zen Comma* Rule AI: **Don't use a comma to separate the two halves of a correlative pair**. The reason for this is fairly simple. Because the second part is necessary to complete the expression, it needs to remain connected to the first part.

Commas separate element in a sentence. We don't want to separate the two parts, so we don't use a comma before *but also*.

### Exception to the Rule

As with many punctuation rules, there are exceptions to this rule. Sometimes, an expression or phrase between *not only* and *but also* requires commas. Let's add such a phrase to our example to understand what this means.

He was sure not only that the harvester was full, which was expected at the end of the day, but also that he was too tired to empty it.

Sure enough, we see a comma before *but also*. However, that comma is not there because of *but also*. Rather it is there to match the first comma before *which*.

The clause *which was expected at the end of the day* needs to be separated from the sentence with commas because, like all *which* clauses, it provides information that is not necessary to understand the main point of the sentence. This comma use is reflected in *Zen Comma* Rule J: **Use commas to separate non-restrictive phrases and clauses starting with *which***.

Thus, the commas are required by the *which* clause and not the *not only . . . but also* correlative pair. In this case, that clause happens to be immediately prior to *but also*, so the comma it requires is immediately before *but also*.

If we take out the *which* clause and the two commas it requires, we are left with no comma before *but also*.

# Commas and Quotation Marks

## The Koan

Bumbo knocked on the door to the Temple of Meaning and said, “May I come in?”

“Did you bring a comma?” his teacher replied.

“Yes,” Bumbo answered.

“Ah,” said the teacher, “bring it inside.”

## The Lesson

Bumbo wants to speak to his teacher, to have a conversation with him. If we write the conversation, the words they speak will be in quotation marks. His teacher, as we have seen, is a stickler for correct comma use, so he reminds Bumbo that they will need commas to separate the quotations from the main sentences.

The teacher reminds Bumbo that the commas go inside the quotation marks. He tells Bumbo to bring the comma inside so that their conversation may be written correctly.

## The Discussion

This koan discusses a common question: Do the commas go inside the quotation marks or outside. In American English conventions, the comma goes inside the quotation marks, as we see in this example:

“**Use commas correctly,**” the Zen Comma master told Bumbo.

This is a simple example, one that most writers get correct. With the comma inside the quotation mark, this example follows *Zen Comma* Rule AH: Put the comma inside the final quotation mark. However, comma use is a bit more tricky when we quote someone’s words as part of the main sentence, as follows.

When the Zen Comma master told Bumbo to “**use commas correctly or be punished,**” Bumbo immediately began studying.

In this example, the introductory description needs to be followed by a comma (Rule G). However, the introductory description ends with a quoted phrase. The comma goes inside the quotation marks here, also following Rule AH.

Finally, here’s the comma use that catches most people. If you are using quotation marks to indicate that you are writing about words, as opposed to using the words, and if you put those words in a series, where do you put the commas?

In British English, you will put the commas *after* the quotation marks, but in American English, you put the commas inside the quotation marks, as follows.

I have trouble spelling “**ennui,**” “**myriad,**” “**onomatopoeia,**” and “**weird.**”

Some American writers will put the commas outside the quotation marks, following the British conventions. Perhaps they do this because the American convention makes the sentence look ugly due to the spaces between the words and the quotation marks that follows them. This is not a good way to make punctuation decisions. The correct way to make decisions about commas is to know the rules and follow them consistently. If you are using American English, the commas always go inside the quotation marks.

## Complicated Sentences Clarified by Commas

Sentences can be complicated. They can contain many ideas, communicate many messages to the reader. They can be confusing. With commas in the right places, however, complicated sentences become clear.

Let's look at a complicated sentence and see what the commas do. This sample, from the book *Antrax* by Terry Brooks, contains a whopping **five messages**, but it is easy to understand because Brooks is a comma master and knows how to use commas right.

### The Sample:

*A little later, feeling uneasy, he rose and peered out into the ruins of the city, searching the darkness.*

This sentence is about the character Quentin. It describes when he acts, how he feels, his two actions, and his purpose. In all, this is five different messages to the reader. We, the readers, can easily understand the entire sentence because of the three commas. We'll look at them one at a time.

### First Message:

The first message in this sentence, *a little later*, describes when the action occurred. It is before the subject, so it is introductory, and it describes the main actions, so it is adverbial. We see that it is followed by a comma, which demonstrates *Zen Comma* Rule G: **Put a comma after introductory phrases and clauses**. The comma alerts the reader that the introductory description is finished and that a new message is about to be communicated.

### Second Message:

The second message is *feeling uneasy*. This describes the entire situation being communicated in the sentence. It communicates Quentin's overall state of being. Because it does not modify just one part of the sentence but the sentence as a whole, it serves as an absolute phrase. We see that it is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas, which demonstrates *Zen Comma* Rule AB: **Separate absolute phrases with commas**.

### Third and Fourth Messages (main sentence):

The third and fourth messages form the main idea of the sentence, containing the subject and a compound predicate: *he rose and peered out in to the ruins of the city*. This has no commas, which is correct.

One common mistake is to separate the subject *he* from the predicate, though this is unlikely when the subject is short. This has no comma after the subject, which follows *Zen Comma* Rule AJ: **Don't use a comma to separate the predicate from the subject**.

Another common mistake is to separate the two parts of the compound predicate with a comma. In this case, the first part is *rose* and the second part is *peered out into the ruins of the city*. If we put a comma after *rose*, we separate the second part of the predicate from the subject, which is wrong. By leaving out the comma, we keep the second part connected to the subject, which follows *Zen Comma* Rule AK: **Don't use a comma to separate two parts of a compound subject**.

### **Fifth Message:**

Finally, the last message is *searching the darkness*. It immediately follows *city*, but it does not describe *city*. Rather, it describes Quentin. To make sure the reader doesn't think the city is searching the darkness, we separate it with a comma, which follows *Zen Comma* Rule W: **Use commas to separate final descriptions that don't refer to the immediately preceding text.**

### **Commas and Clarity:**

Although this is a complicated sample (and this is a rather long post), we see that the commas make the meaning clear. We also see that the commas follow clear guidelines. They are not placed haphazardly but are carefully placed to ensure reader understanding.

Each of these comma uses (or non-uses) is described more fully in *Zen Comma*.

## Funny Sign with Comma Error

Never let it be said that I don't have a sense of humor. It might be true, but never say it.

### A Funny Sign

While having my morning coffee, I came across a link to funny, and often unfortunate, store signs (which I call *sighns*). Lo and behold, I found a sign that has a comma error. Go figure.

The text of the sign reads

Watch your parents, these items are sharp!  
(safe for work: <http://chzoddlyspecific.wordpress.com/page/17/?ref=chz>)

### The Problem

This has one comma, and it's wrong. This faulty sentence joins two independent clauses with only a comma. This is called a *comma splice*.

An independent clause has a subject and a predicate, and it can serve as a complete sentence. In this sign, the first independent clause is *Watch your parents*, and the second one is *these items are sharp!*

You can use a comma to join independent clauses, but only if the comma is preceded by a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions are *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*. (The first letters of coordinating conjunctions spell out *FANBOYS*.) Using a comma-conjunction combination to join independent clauses follows *Zen Comma Rule D*: **Put a comma before a coordinating conjunction that joins two independent clauses.**

### The Corrections

In this funny sign, better options are to use a semicolon, a colon, or a period with a capital letter, as follows.

- Watch your parents; these items are sharp!
- Watch your parents: these items are sharp!
- Watch your parents. These items are sharp.

### A Caution

You might think that this sign could read *Watch your parents, because these items are sharp!*, with a comma before *because*. This, too, would be wrong. *Because* is not a coordinating conjunction, so Rule D doesn't apply. In this situation, we follow *Zen Comma Rule F*: **Don't use a comma before *because* when joining two independent clauses--unless needed by another rule.**

## Implied Subject Determines Comma

I believe education organizations (e.g., schools, districts, state departments of education) have an obligation to model correct English. Among other responsibilities, they are charged with helping children become successful, contributing members of society, and this means teaching children to communicate well. For this to happen, educators, at all levels, need to demonstrate the highest standard of language use. Children not only learn what they are formally taught but also learn what they observe.

### The Sample

With this in mind, I found the following misuse of commas on a school district website.

Once logged in, highlight the Grades menu, and choose Grades to view your student's current grades. (<http://www.acalanes.k12.ca.us/auhsd/cwp/view.asp?A=3&Q=276874>)

This has two commas. The first one is correct, but the second one isn't.

### First Comma: CORRECT

The first comma follows the introductory phrase *Once logged in*. This comma demonstrates *Zen Comma* Rule G: **Put a comma after introductory clauses and phrases**. This phrase is before the subject (i.e., introductory) and describes the main action in the predicate. The comma tells the reader when the introductory phrase ends and when the main sentence is about to begin.

### Second Comma: INCORRECT

Now look at the second comma. To understand why it's wrong, we need to parse this sentence. The subject here is *You*, which is implied by the imperative (i.e., a command) nature of the sentence. *Zen Comma* Rule E tells us to **use commas as if implied words were present**. In this case, we need to add the subject to the sentence to figure out where the commas go or shouldn't go.

When we put the subject in the sentence, we get this:

Once logged in, **you** highlight the Grades menu, and choose Grades to view your student's current grades.

Now that the subject is in place, we see that the sentence has a compound predicate. The sentence has two main verbs and describes two main actions, both of which are linked to the subject *You*.

Here's the problem. We don't separate two parts of a compound sentence with a comma, which this sentence does. To fix this sentence, we need to apply *Zen Comma* Rule AK: **Don't use commas to separate two parts of a compound predicate**. Thus, we remove the second comma.

## More Writing Resources

Visit Hostile Editing (<http://hostileediting.com>) for more information about these resources by David Bowman, owner and chief editor of Precise Edit.

### *300 Days of Better Writing*

300 Top strategies for writing clearly, persuasively, and directly—one strategy at a time presented in plain language. Includes a topic index.

### *Bang! Writing with Impact*

114 strategies in 18 categories with one purpose: Make your readers pay attention. What the strategies do, how they work, and how to use them successfully.

### *Precise Edit Training Manual*

The 29 most common strategies we use and the problems we fix. Comprehensive, practical instruction on good writing and effective editing. Acclaimed by writers worldwide.

### *Which Word Do I Use?*

The 26 most commonly mistaken word pairs, fully explained so you can use the correct word and say what you mean.

### *Writing Tips for a Year*

Receive a new writing tip, strategy, resource, or piece of advice—every day for an entire year. That's 365 days of writing instruction delivered by e-mail, straight to your inbox. Strategies from *Writing Tips for a Year* were used to create *300 Days of Better Writing*.

### *Zen Comma*

*Zen Comma*, an e-book in PDF and e-pub formats, examines the 17 major uses and misuses of commas. This is the book that finally tells you where to put commas—and where to take them out.