

All too Common: Notes on Comma Misuse

A plague has descended upon undergraduate writing. While neither a physical illness nor an environmental disaster, this pestilence is just as deadly. I'm talking, of course, about the over- and misuse of commas. Commas serve an important but oft-overlooked function in writing: they make complex sentences readable. To achieve this, however, you must use them correctly.

Comma Mistakes

Comma splice. This is a common grammatical mistake that students make. This is when a writer jams two independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) together, forcibly uniting them by a comma. The result is an awkward sentence.

Error: Alfred Stieglitz helped to establish photography as a fine art in America, because of this many photographers emulated his style and vision.

Everything following the comma should be in its own sentence. Instead, try this on for size:

Fix: Alfred Stieglitz helped to establish photography as a fine art in America. Many photographers emulated his style and vision because of this.

Gratuitous use. More so than grammatical misuse, this is the root of many comma problems. When read aloud, a comma indicates a slight pause in delivery. Read this to your friends:

Error: The great, Xhosa cattle killing, of 1856-7, has long defied attempts by historians, and anthropologists, to provide a plausible explanation.

Midway through, your friends walk out of the room, leaving you to stumble on this profusion of punctuation alone. Here is a less cluttered version of the same sentence:

Fix: The great Xhosa cattle killing of 1856-7 has long defied attempts by historians and anthropologists to provide a plausible explanation.

Comma Use

When used correctly, commas serve to link dependent clauses and phrases together. Regardless of their perils, commas are lovely for separating an introductory clause from an independent clause, signaling interjections, particularly ones that highlight something, and, of course, crafting lists. Clever, right?