

INPUT GUIDE

USING COMMAS LIKE A PRO

by Jean Sexton

We've covered many of the basics that you would need to write for ADB, Inc.'s publications. You have learned to use capitalization sparingly and according to our guide. You have learned to avoid jargon lest the Purple Pen of Perdition swoop down upon your manuscript. You are home free, right?

Well, you have a touchdown only if you consider an incomplete pass to a receiver standing in the end zone to be worth six points! Punctuation is how you reach the goal of a well-written article. An article that is properly punctuated is one that has the final touch that shows your professionalism. I'll be writing a series of articles that will serve as a quick review of punctuation marks and that will focus on the problems we see most frequently.

Commas are one of the hardest pieces of punctuation to use correctly. They actually do have rules for when they are used. Yes, they get used to indicate a pause or a variation in voice pitch, but that is like limiting passes to ones that are only five yards long. Let's explore some of those other uses.

Commas are used before words that join two phrases that could stand as separate sentences. Frank could have won the tournament, but John's ship hit with all of its photon torpedoes. Steve Cole hung out in the booth at Origins, for Chuck Strong had the *F&E* tournaments under control.

Commas follow introductory phrases, especially "if-then" statements. These are examples of properly used commas.

If people misbehave on the BBS, then the consequences are dire.

Feeling confident, Paul fired all weapons.
To paint a mini, cover it first in primer.

Commas separate items in a series. This includes adjectives before a noun. (Hint: if you can put an "and" between the adjectives, then they could use commas.) ADB, Inc. uses a comma before "and" and "or" in a list. Examples:

Steve thanked his fans, Petrick, and Jean. (Without the comma, one is forced to wonder how many fans Steve has.)

Proud, tall Abe walked towards Petrick so he could collect the Gold Hat. (Abe is proud and tall.)

Jean came home, grabbed her laptop, went to Lumberton, and caught her bus to Amarillo. (Here, the "items" are really a series of events, but they still get commas.)

Commas can also be used to set off nonessential phrases. If the phrase happens in the middle of the sentence, it gets matching commas. If the phrase is essential, it gets no commas.

Ben, covered in mud, longed for a bath. (The "covered in mud" explains why Ben wanted a bath, but isn't essential to the sentence, so it gets commas.)

Wearing his uniform, Ketrick cut quite a dash at the party thrown by the admiral. (One would assume that Ketrick normally wore a uniform to such a party, so the phrase isn't essential.)

Klingon women preferred the Sangfroid dagger, generally speaking. (By using "generally speaking", the sentence covers any objections that a female Klingon engineer might prefer an engineer dagger, but the phrase isn't really necessary.)

Ships with no shields are particularly vulnerable. (Not all ships are particularly vulnerable, so the "with no shields" is essential to the meaning of the sentence, so it has no commas.)

Sometimes commas get tricky. Compare these sentences:
They fired at the Tholian ship, laying web.
They fired at the Tholian ship laying web.

The first implies that there is only one ship and it happens to be laying web while firing. The second implies that there are more Tholian ships and they chose to shoot the one laying web.

Commas are important! Imagine what Olivette Roche would do if she heard these words: "Watch Admiral Thomas See How He Eats Shoots And Leaves". No doubt her expose of him would punctuate that sentence as follows: "Watch Admiral Thomas! See how he eats, shoots, and leaves?" and Admiral Thomas in the video would leave piles of corpses in his wake after he finished his dinner of a huge, very rare steak. Little would Olivette think that Admiral Thomas just became a vegetarian last week!

But a writer must be wary! Commas can be addicting and can creep in where they should not. These sentences are all wrong.

Even Jean's Purple Pen of Perdition, can make mistakes. ADB, Inc. recently published, *Hydran Attack, Klingons PD20M, and Communiqué #47*.

Tony is playing the low-down, dirty-rotten, methane-breathing, trashcan-looking, Hydrans.

Commas shouldn't be used to separate the subject and the verb of a sentence, no matter how many words that subject has. Commas don't start off a list. Finally, a comma doesn't end a list.

Commas are also used in quotations, but we'll save dialogue and its punctuation for another issue of *Captain's Log*.

You should now know everything you need to use commas correctly. Remember that this information can also be applied to your Real Life writing to impress bosses and co-workers. Now go out and write some more fiction and information for Command Notes, Term Papers, and Tactical Notes!

FORMAT FOR PUBLICATION

All too often, submitted manuscripts are very badly done and require an enormous amount of work to format them for printing out. (This applies to both "going into a product" and "going into the reading stack". SVC often prints out submissions and puts them on a clipboard to read at home, or elsewhere when he has time to kill, such as in the doctor's waiting room or the drive to Origins.) Here are some pointers.

1. No Blank Lines: Do not include blank lines except in places where similar material (in published products) has blank lines. These have to be taken out, and this either requires manual removal, or tedious searches (to avoid removing the blank lines that need to be there).

2. Two Columns: Assume it will be printed in two columns and do not include lines with a bunch of tabs that go into the second column.

3. Read the Style Sheets: We have this material on the website. Format your document by the style sheet, such as:
right: Turn #1

wrong: Turn#1, Turn# 1, turn 1, turn #1

Seriously, it's not that hard to follow the guidelines we have published, and doing so avoids having your story or article sent to the bottom of the stack.

4. Be Consistent: If you make up a fictional name, spell it the same way every time you use it.

5. Spell Check: It doesn't take that long. Just do it. If you miss a word, we'll forgive you, but doing the spell check makes the story easier to read (and reduces my use of purple ink).

6. Follow the Leader: Go find something else we already published that is the same kind of material and follow that format instead of inventing a new one. (Warning: Find the most recent product you can as I have been correcting some of the Steves' long-repeated format mis-steps.)