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Some Commas Should Neither Be Seen Nor Heard

Don't place a comma between subject and verb

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An earlier column discussed three situations in which commas are wrongly omitted: the “breathless which clause” (e.g., “The trial court granted the motion for summary judgment which the appellate court affirmed.”), the descriptive “-ing” clause (e.g., “The court dismissed the complaint finding that plaintiff had failed to allege a prima facie case.”), and the run-on sentence. Today's column addresses a circumstance in which commas are wrongly added between subject and verb, as in the following:

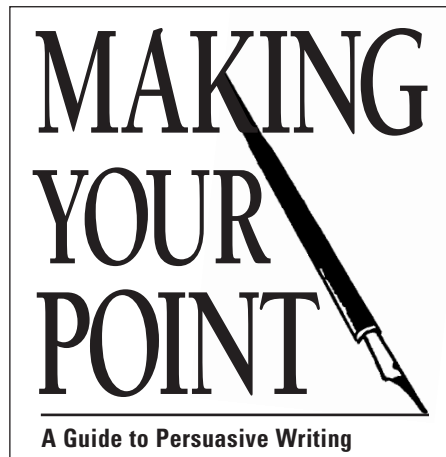
Under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, employees in publicly traded companies who allege retaliatory discharge or other discrimination, may file a complaint, first with the Department of Labor and then, if necessary, in Federal court.

By the eighteenth word in this long sentence (“discrimination”), the writer evidently felt the need for a comma, particularly after a “who clause,” which in other circumstances might be bracketed by commas (e.g., “Judicial clerks, who

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work for peanuts, can't begin repaying their college loans until they enter the private sector.”).

In the sentence about the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the comma after “discrimination” serves no useful purpose. It unnecessarily interrupts transmittal of the information regarding what employees in publicly traded companies can do under the



act (they can file a complaint).

The rule is that one should not place a comma between subject and verb. It's a good rule — practical, not vestigial like the rule against splitting infinitives, and not merely conventional like the rule that periods go inside rather than outside quotation marks. The rule is premised on the reader's instinctive reaction to the relationship between subject and verb.

When a reader sees a subject, the reader not only expects but demands a verb. The longer the verb is delayed, the more impatient the reader becomes. This is why you shouldn't put long interruptive clauses between subject and verb, as in

“ABC Co., looking to strengthen its position among the leaders in the industry by way of merger as well as internal growth, made a tender offer for the stock of XYZ Corp.”

Generally, a comma means you have finished at least a portion of a thought. Placing a comma between subject and verb sends the reader a mixed message. On the one hand, the comma says you have finished a thought. On the other hand, the nonappearance of the verb indicates that the thought isn't finished. The reader has to sort out the mixed message before moving on.

Compound Verbs

A typical mistake is to add a comma between a subject and the second of two verbs in a compound verb, as follows:

Dr. Deductible specializes in hemophilia, but treats many different blood disorders.

The compound verb consists of “specializes” and “treats.” (The term “compound verb” is somewhat counter intuitive because it calls two verbs one.) The comma after hemophilia is inappropriate because you don't want the reader to pause between the subject (Dr. Deductible) and the second part of the compound verb (treats). You want the reader to find out as quickly as possible that Dr. Deductible's practice is broader than just the one disorder.

Few writers would place a comma between Dr. Deductible and the first part of the compound verb, “specializes” (i.e., “Dr. Deductible, specializes...”), but

many would think a pause appropriate before beginning the second thought, namely, that not only does the doctor specialize in hemophilia, but he treats other blood disorders as well. Corrected, the sentence has no comma:

Dr. Deductible specializes in hemophilia but treats many different blood disorders.

A writer who adds the comma after hemophilia may be reasoning from the premise that changes of idea should be marked by commas. Because the sentence contains a change of idea from “specializes in” to “treats many,” the writer adds a comma. The flaw is in the premise, not the logic. Not all changes of idea need to be marked by a comma.

The reaction to a comma is so deeply embedded in a reader’s consciousness that a comma sends a signal whether the writer means to or not. The comma says “pause.” A pause can, theoretically, aid comprehension, but not when inserted between subject and verb.

Here is another example of a comma improperly placed between a subject and the second part of a compound verb:

The police took the suspect into custody, but released him after they determined he was not in town on the day of the crime.

The subject is the “police,” and the verbs are “took” and “released.” The comma after custody improperly separates the subject from the second verb, “released.” A speaker might pause after “custody,” but a reader would not — unless forced to by the comma.

The competing principles in this sentence are (1) place a comma between the old thought (took into custody) and the new thought (released) and (2) don’t place a comma between subject and verb. Here, the second principle controls. If the new thought doesn’t include a new or repeated subject, then the thought shouldn’t be preceded by a comma.

One more example of a comma improperly placed between the subject and the second part of a compound verb is as follows:

The Code does not make clear whether a machine that can function as a pari-mutuel ticket issuing machine, and be adapted as a slot machine is illegal.

Significant ideas appear on both sides of the “and,” but the relevant subject — “that” in the embedded “that clause” — is not restated. The verbs in the compound verb are “can function” and “be adapted.” Because the second verb in the relevant clause is acting for the single subject, the verb should not be preceded by a comma.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

What is the threshold that has to be passed to create critical mass?

The most obvious initial change is to take out “is the” and “that,” reducing the sentence to “What threshold has to be passed to create critical mass?” Because the idea of something having to be passed is implicit in the concept of threshold, you can drop the phrase “has to be passed to create” if you put back “is the.”

The new version: What is the threshold for critical mass?

Alternate version: What is the critical mass threshold?

“Threshold” may not be the best metaphor to pair with critical mass. At a threshold, one is on the brink but has not entered. When you have reached “critical mass” — a term generally associated with nuclear explosions — you have entered a new plane of existence (or nonexistence). The reader probably wants to know the first point past the threshold, where critical mass has been reached.

Try this:

At what point [or When] do you reach critical mass? ■