

THE SERIAL COMMA

Grammarians often argue about “the serial comma” (also called “the Oxford comma” in Britain or the “Harvard comma” in America). The question is roughly *should writers always use a comma before the last item in a list?* Normally, commas can be used to separate three or more items in a list. For instance, examine the sentence below:

A gourmet chef knows how to serve all varieties of rice, beans, shellfish, and desserts.

However, you will also see the same sentence written without the third commas, as in this example:

A gourmet chef knows how to serve all varieties of rice, beans, shellfish and desserts.

Does it matter if the final comma appears or not? Many writers--especially journalists--prefer to leave out the comma before the final conjunction. This saves space and ink when mass-printing newspapers or magazines. This final, optional comma is called the "serial comma" by repressed grammarians who have nothing better to do than label commas. About 99% of the time, it makes no real difference whether you use the serial comma or leave it out.

However, it's a good idea to include it if that missing comma could cause confusion:

A gourmet food salesman should know how to display all varieties of rice and beans, salt and pepper and peaches and cream.

Boy, that's confusing! Here, the serial comma would help make it clear the author is discussing three items rather than two or four or five or six: (a) rice and beans, (b) salt and paper, and (c) peaches and cream:

A gourmet food salesman should know how to display all varieties of rice and beans, salt and pepper, and peaches and cream.

This is why I suggest students habitually use that final serial comma. One time in ten, it will help prevent confusion in readers, so its use is generally good. However, I don't take off points for students who chose to leave it out if it wouldn't cause confusion for a reader. MLA guidelines consider it optional. You will need to adjust your preferences depending on the style guide used in your class or by your publisher.