



One of the main functions of commas is to separate different items from one another in a list.

To make a delicious meal, all you really need are **various vegetables, some form of protein, whichever spices you prefer, and a little bit of patience.**

I usually prefer not to read **erotic novels, romances, or thrillers.**

If there are only two items, the word “and” will suffice with no need for a comma.

My two favorite people in this world are **my son and my husband.**

• The Oxford Comma •

Some sentences have items in a series without the final comma, as in the sentence:

For school, your child needs pencils, glue sticks and a ruler.

The final comma in a list—the one that comes right before the conjunction that’ll end the list—is called a **serial comma**, or more famously, the **Oxford comma**. Leaving it out is usually acceptable and in rare cases preferred—but there are certain cases where leaving it out can be confusing. Take a look at the following three sentences:

1. Today I introduced my fiancé to my best friends, Greg and Melissa.
2. I’d like to thank you for your generosity, your kind words and the chocolates you shared with me.
3. All I’ve done for the past two days is work, read and sleep.

In sentence 1, it’s pretty clear that this is *not* items in a series. In sentence 3, even without the serial comma, it’s clear that this *is* a series of three items, listed like any other.

But in sentence 2, which is the case? The fact is, there’s no way to know whether it’s like the first or third example. The sentence is ambiguous. Although this ambiguity doesn’t crop up too often, it’s worth keeping in mind.

Whether you choose to include the serial comma or not, the most important thing is to be consistent with it. If you’re *not* using it, make sure you never do. If you *are*, use it every time.

• Parallelism •

Parallelism refers to making sure that all the items in your series are formatted the same way. For an example of what it looks like when items lack consistency, take the following:

At eighteen months old, toddlers have brains that are busy doing amazing things, including trillions of synapses firing, learning new words at the rate of one per two waking hours, and they build stronger emotional relationships with their parents.

Looking at the items in this list, we find that these items don't look like each other at all.

1. **Trillions** of synapses firing
2. **Learning** new words at the rate of one per two waking hours
3. **They** build stronger emotional relationships with their parents

To clean this sentence up, we'll need to rearrange them all to be structured in parallel:

1. **Firing** trillions of synapses
2. **Learning** new words at the rate of one per two waking hours
3. **Building** stronger emotional relationships with their parents

Now the sentence is structured with the three items in the sequence formatted the same way, all three beginning with the same type of word, -ing verbs:

At eighteen months old, toddlers have brains that are busy doing amazing things, including **firing** trillions of synapses, **learning** new words at the rate of one per two waking hours, and **building** stronger emotional relationships with their parents.

• Commas Within Items •

But when items in a series get *too* complex, commas alone aren't enough to guide the reader through all the points. Let's try adding more information to the items in this sentence:

At eighteen months old, toddlers have brains that are busy doing amazing things, including

1. firing millions of new synapses every second, **amounting to trillions in total**
2. learning new words every day, **averaging one per two waking hours**
3. building stronger emotional relationships, **especially with their parents.**

When the items have commas within themselves, a comma can't *also* separate the items from each other; it would get confusing as to which commas indicated items and which were just functioning as commas. In this case, we need something stronger to separate the items.

Sometimes described as a "super comma," the **semicolon** also separates different parts of sentences from one another—and it does so to a stronger degree than the comma.

In a complicated list of items in a series where the items contain commas within themselves, where commas are no good to separate the items in the list, semicolons are needed:

At eighteen months old, toddlers have brains that are busy doing amazing things, including **firing** millions of new synapses every second, amounting to trillions in total; **learning** new words every day, averaging one per two waking hours; and **building** stronger emotional relationships, especially with their parents.