

Exercise #3: Practicing Punctuation

from *Writing with Style*, by John Trimble pg. 126

As before, identify which of the five functions of punctuation the underlined punctuation mark is doing. Write out the list of numbered punctuation marks and then your answer.

- 1—Connecting complete thoughts
- 2—Comma after introductory element
- 3—Separating interrupting elements
- 4—Separating items in a series
- 5—Pointing your reader to what you wish to highlight

Most people have trouble with commas. Where do you put them in? When can you leave them out? If you demand a definitive answer, lock yourself in a padded cell with one of the thick handbooks. If you'll settle for something incomplete but useful, read on.

My first tip, applicable in most situations, is this: Use the comma when there's a pause AND a drop in pitch.

Test any sentence this way: Read it aloud, in your best radio voice, as if to a national audience. If you find that you pause somewhere to make things intelligible, and if you hear the pitch of your voice drop there too, insert a comma. If you still doubt, have a friend read the sentence aloud. The pauses and drops in pitch—should quickly announce themselves.

Don't be cowed by commas. Don't think you have to master 85 rules (though even professional writers—especially professional writers—will periodically consult them). Correct comma usage is mostly a matter of ear and common sense. In fact, in most cases the rules simply codify what common sense recommends. Which is why one of the country's top style authorities, *Words into Type*, can say, without threat of contradiction, "the primary purpose of the comma is to prevent misreading" (italics added). Even this business of being guided by your ear really boils down to common sense. Your "ear" tells you to pause in a given place because your good sense, if it's awake, tells you that a pause there—a moment of separation—is needed. Without one, the parts of your sentence would bump into each other, and you'd risk a misread.