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Opinions

Do commas still matter?



By **Kathleen Parker** Opinion writer October 4 at 7:28 PM

My favorite bumper sticker I've never seen: Commas matter.

So I've always thought, and do still believe with the passion of one whose knuckles were rapped for grammatical errors. I mean this only metaphorically — no bloody fingers — but using incorrect grammar was the eighth deadly sin in my childhood home.

How grateful I am that this was so.

And now I have a confession: I've begun to forget the rules. What used to come naturally has become a test of recall. Does a comma go here? Should I use the Oxford comma?

I don't think this is singly attributable to the aging process (shut up) but rather to our increasing sloppiness in new ways of communicating. We may as well blame social media for this, too, especially Twitter. When you only have 140 characters to make a point, why waste one on a comma?

Fortunately, I have editors to sweep up behind me and make sure all my commas are in order, though even they (and I, obviously) occasionally miss something, even (gasp!) recently a subject-verb disagreement. Of all things!

Yes, that was a sentence fragment, deliberately incorrect in the service of KP style, as opposed to AP (Associated Press) style, which is the final word for

most newspaper copy editors.

In my personal stylebook, developed over almost 30 years of column writing, it's fine to misuse grammar intentionally. But it's not all right to misuse a word, such as "over," where one should use "during."

If you're lucky (and probably older), you learned these things in school, along with the multiplication tables. They're imprinted on your brain so that the correct answer comes relatively quickly and accurately.

Not so for younger generations, who've had the dubious benefit all their lives of spelling and grammar checkers, as well as handheld devices. It may not matter how one produces a sum or a sentence, but it's my pleasure to worry about such things. The quick mental function that says 9 times 9 is 81 without benefit of a calculator, besides being strangely satisfying, provides periodic reassurance that the brain is sufficiently oxygenated.

Whatever synapses are involved in that precise if rote calculation must besides do something good for the noggin. Calisthenics for the brain, perhaps? What, then, is failing to occur in minds that are deprived of these daily exercises? The correct answer is a Google away, but I'll leave this to the dear readers while I return to the question of grammar. Does it matter, really?

Yes, please.

It matters because good grammar conveys a great deal about a person.

Quality is in the details — and attention to commas, semicolons, dangling participles, gerunds and the proper placement of quotation marks says to the reader that this person is careful, considerate (because bad grammar is painful to the discerning eye), and (there's that Oxford comma) competent.

"Grammar is credibility," says Amanda Sturgill, an associate professor of

communications at Elon University, where I recently spoke. “If you’re not taking care of the small things, people assume you’re not taking care of the big things.”

Sturgill, who devotes an entire day of class to the lowly comma, says that most students have a limited appreciation of the nuances of comma usage. Most have been taught that you insert a comma when you would naturally pause in speaking or where you would take a breath.

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As Sturgill makes clear in her [14 points of comma usage](#), there’s more to it — and not just grammatically.

In April, journalist Mona Chalabi made a little splash in a video commentary for the Guardian when she averred that grammar snobs are patronizing, pretentious, censorious — and a bunch of other stuff. Oh, and also probably racist. This is because, wait for it, most people who correct others are older and white. She claimed that grammar-mongers effectively silence voices straining to be heard.

It’s an interesting point, but do people really go around correcting strangers’ grammar? One could stay quite busy doing this.

I suppose I’m one of those snobs even if sometimes I, too, err. But we do no favors to rising generations to pretend that it’s only the thought that counts. Better than finding excuses — or implying that good grammar is an attitude of old white folks — our efforts might be better directed at teaching the rules by which the real world abides.

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