**Mistake of the Month: Missing Commas**

There are two types of writers in this world: those who use too many commas and those who use too few. While unnecessary commas can turn straightforward sentences into twisting labyrinths of syntactical confusion, missing a critical comma can change the entire meaning of your sentence.

Consider [the headline from the now-infamous Rachael Ray cover of *Tails* magazine](http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2011/03/24/missing-commas-cause-cannibalistic-bloodbath): “**Rachael Ray finds inspiration in cooking her family and her dog**.” While the line breaks of the original cover make it apparent what the editors meant to say, the lack of commas between the three items in the list—“cooking,” “family,” and “her dog”—caused *Tails* to accidentally portray Ray as **a cannibal** who gleefully cooks her family and dog.

Here are some places in your writing where you should include commas:

**1. After an introductory element.** When **[complex sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/complexsentence.htm)** begin with a phrase or clause, a comma is required to separate the introductory element and the independent clause. The previous sentence demonstrates this rule, but let’s look at some more examples:

* Without a care in the world, Mildred raced down the hill on her brand-new velocipede.
* In an attempt to fix the TV, he smacked the side of the set.
* To her, Paris would always be the most magical city in the world.

Note that with shorter introductory elements—generally those consisting of four or fewer words—you can technically skip the comma. However, it’s never wrong to use a comma in this instance, and eschewing it can lead to confusion.

**2. Around a nonrestrictive or nonessential element.** [Nonrestrictive elements](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/everyday_writer3e/20errors/5.html) provide added information, but without them the sentence would still make sense. For example, “My wife, Karen, bakes the best peach cobbler.” Presumably the speaker has only one wife, so telling us her name is a helpful but nonessential aside. [This piece from the *New York Times*](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/21/the-most-comma-mistakes/?_r=0) has more on the difference between essential and nonessential elements, but here are a couple of additional examples:

* My best friend, Jimmy Brown, always brings an extra pudding cup for me. (People can only have one best friend at a time, so his name is a nonessential element.)
* I played the game Settlers of Catan for six hours this weekend with my friend Parvati. (Here, neither *Settlers of Catan* nor *Parvati* should be set off with commas because there are more games and friends in the world other than the two mentioned in the sentence.)

*That* and *which* indicate essential and nonessential elements, respectively. When you use *that*, don’t use a comma, as in “The ants that have infested my kitchen show no signs of leaving.” In this example, we need to know which specific ants the speaker is talking about. However, in the sentence “Ants, which have infested my kitchen, are my least favorite insect,” the aside set off by commas is interesting, yet taking it out doesn’t change the core meaning of the sentence.

**3. After the next-to-last item in a list.** Among English enthusiasts, the [Oxford (or serial) comma](http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/punctuation/comma/36/oxford-comma/) is one of the most frequently debated topics. (Ironically, British English doesn’t tend to use the Oxford comma as frequently as American English.) When you have three or more items in a list, you have the option to use a comma between the next-to-last and last items in that list.

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**Similes and metaphors** are both used to make comparisons or elucidate concepts.

**Metaphors** simply state a comparison. **Similes** use the words “like” or “as” to compare things. Because they both make comparisons, all similes are metaphors, but not all metaphors are similes.

Here are some examples of similes and metaphors:

Life is like a box of chocolates. (Simile)  
My life is an open book. (Metaphor)  
That baby is as cute as a button! (Simile)  
Baby, you’re a firework. (Metaphor)

Both similes and metaphors add color and depth to language.