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Peripatetic editorial notes

Writing well (2)

Ceylon Medical Journal, 2000; 45: 97-99

Clauses and comma use

Relative clauses may or may not need commas, depending on the type of clause. It is convenient to identify the two principal types of relative clauses as defining (or restrictive) and commenting (or non-restrictive). Defining relative clauses are not parenthetical, and do not need commas. Their function is to define (ie. restrict) nouns or other clauses, eg.

- 23 Trains *that do not stop at Moratuwa* ought to stop at Mount Lavinia.
- 24 The surgeon *who performed the operations* did not participate in evaluating outcomes in our study.
- 25 Nurses *seated in the rear* may not hear the lecturer.
- 26 Hospitals *where facilities for dialysis are available* should receive adequate resources.

In each of the sentences above the relative clauses (in italics) serve to define or restrict the noun, and do not lend themselves to enclosure in parentheses. In sentences 27, 28 and 29, the relative clauses (in italics) merely comment on, but **do not restrict the noun. They need commas.**

- 27 In 1958, *when this operating theatre was constructed*, surgery was relatively simple.
- 28 The Colombo nurses' training school, *where most of us have been trained*, now badly needs refurbishing.
- 29 The decision to operate, *that was taken after much consultation*, proved to be the right one.

If you are still not quite certain about the distinction between defining (restrictive) and commenting (non-restrictive) relative clauses, read the seven sentences foregoing without them. Sentences 23 to 26 cease to convey their full intended meaning if the restrictive clauses are removed, unless the noun has been defined earlier in the context, or will be defined later. Sentences 27 to 29, in contrast, will convey the essential message quite adequately even without the relative clause, which could just as well have been placed in parentheses.

Participial clauses and phrases, as in sentences 30 to 33, may be treated in the same way as relative clauses.

Peripatetic editorial notes

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- 30 Operations lasting more than three hours should not be performed in this theatre. (Defining)
- 31 The judge, having dozed through most of the trial, delivered an atrocious judgement in favour of the complainant. (Commenting)
- 32 People living in glass houses should switch off the lights before undressing.
- 33 The nurse, being unused to theatre procedure, handled the instruments on the tray.

One comma or two or none?

Commas may be completely omitted from sentences 27 to 29, 31 and 33 without compromising clarity, although comprehension may be easier with the pauses imposed by commas. However, placing one but not the other is regarded as a breach of a rule of comma use by nearly all authorities on writing. One of them says sternly about this slovenly habit, "There is no defense for such punctuation..." (1); and another calls it a "... very common blunder" (2). Below are some examples of this contemptible error.

- 34 The nurse being unused to theatre procedures, touched the instruments on the tray. (Insert a comma after *nurse*. See sentence 33.)
- 35 Patients, who do not comply, will not derive much relief. (Omit both commas, for this is a defining relative clause.)
- 36 Please inform us for our record purposes, your complete postal address. (Omit comma or insert one after *us*.)
- 37 The leader of the surgical team, Dr A B C Perera gave a press interview after the operation. (Omit comma or insert one after *Perera*.)

Arbitrary rules or useful ones?

If you are tempted to dismiss these rules about relative clauses as arbitrary inventions of finicky grammarians, take a careful look at the sentences below.

- 38 Lawyers whose minds are dull are unlikely to win many cases for their clients.
- 39 Lawyers, whose minds are dull, are unlikely to win many cases for their clients.

In sentence 38 the defining relative clause restricts the noun to a particular class of lawyers, and the result is a truism, a commonplace. The commas in sentence 39 signal a commenting relative clause that imposes no restrictions on the noun, and implies that all lawyers have dull minds. The commas convert a truism to a gratuitous insult.

- 40 These are particular needs of women, who have no special skills, that the Ministry should examine carefully.

The commas in sentence 40 suggest that all women have no special skills, an assertion that would surely raise their ire in any country where comma use is properly understood. Sri Lanka is not such a one.

Other uses of the comma

The apostrophe is used to indicate the possessive of nouns or pronouns. No one will have difficulty with, for example, *Cyril's house* or *the animal's heart-beat*. For the possessive singular of nouns 's should be added whatever the final consonant (eg. *James's book, witch's brew, horse's mouth*), although there are a few exceptions.

Some pronouns do not have an apostrophe in their possessive case (eg. *his, hers, theirs, yours, ours*). Note that *it's* is not the possessive of *it*, but a contraction of *it is*. It's a very common error to use *it's* as a possessive. It's helpful to remember this sentence: It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas (3). The pronoun *one*, and compound pronouns ending in *-one* and *-body*, need an apostrophe for their possessive case (eg. *one's, anybody's, everybody's*).

Write dates always as *Wednesday, 23 August 2000* or as *23 August 2000*. In accordance with SI convention,

Colvin Goonaratna, Joint editor, *CMJ*

use a space, not a comma, to separate digits when there are 5 or more (eg. 3200, 25 810, 936 215, 9 865 382.)

References

1. Strunk W Jr, White E B. The elements of style. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co Inc, 1979.
2. Gowers E. The complete plain words. (Revised by Greenbaum S and Whitcut J). Penguin Books, 1986.
3. The Economist Pocket Stylebook. London: The Economist Publications Ltd, 1986.

Millennium UN Summit (1)

At the largest assembly ever of world leaders, they rattled through five-minute forgettable speeches and promised fine things they will soon forget. Then they prepared to put their names to a declaration that commits them to make the 21st century fairer, more humane and more peaceful than its unmentioned predecessor. But will this week's conclave of around 160 heads of state or government at the United Nations' "millennium summit" in New York, make a ha'p'orth of difference to the billions of victims of poverty, cruelty or war? The UN is determined that it should, even though the past decade has been littered with worthy UN conferences resulting in even worthier pledges that, by and large, have changed people's lives very little.

The Economist, September 9th - 15th, 2000 (page 19).