

A Word, Please: The Oxford comma

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“We don’t ban the Oxford comma.”

That was the subject line of an email the Associated Press Stylebook editors recently sent to subscribers. To anyone who’s been on the frontlines of the comma wars, the message seemed like an olive branch — or possibly a white flag.

Not familiar with the Oxford comma controversy? It’s a tempest in a teapot — a trumped-up battle between people who eschew an optional comma, called the Oxford or serial comma, and the devotees of this little punctuation mark.

The Oxford comma, or serial comma, comes before the conjunction in a list of three or more things. If you write, “The flag is red, white, and blue,” you’re using an Oxford comma. If you write, “The flag is red, white and blue,” you’re not. Either way, you’re using correct punctuation because this comma is optional.

The publishing world’s two major style guides take different positions on whether editors should use this comma. The Chicago Manual of Style, followed by many book and magazine publishers, is in favor.

“When a conjunction joins the last two elements in a series of three or more, a comma — known as the serial or series comma or the Oxford comma — should appear before the conjunction,” says the Chicago manual’s 17th edition, adding for emphasis: “Chicago strongly recommends this widely practiced usage.”

AP is mostly opposed. “Use commas to separate elements in a series, but do not put a comma before the conjunction in most simple series,” the stylebook advises. But unlike Chicago, AP editors don’t use the next sentence to strenuously underscore their point. Instead, AP emphasizes that the rule is flexible. “Include a

final comma in a simple series if omitting it could make the meaning unclear.” Dig a little deeper into the Chicago manual and you see they make exceptions, too, albeit reluctantly.

So AP and Chicago — the most influential voices on the Oxford comma — are de facto leaders of opposing camps. Oxford comma enthusiasts, then, could see AP as the enemy, which could put AP on the defensive, which in turn could inspire an email like the one I got in my in-box this month. Just a theory.

AP gave an example in which the Oxford comma makes sense of an otherwise confusing sentence: “‘The governor convened his most trusted advisers, economist Olivia Schneider, and polling expert Carlton Torres.’ (If the governor is convening unidentified advisers plus Schneider and Torres, the final comma is needed.)”

If you meant instead that the trusted advisers were none other than Schneider and Torres, no comma goes before the conjunction, AP notes: “The governor convened his most trusted advisers, economist Olivia Schneider and polling expert Carlton Torres.”

AP missed an opportunity here. They should have given an example with “adviser” in the singular instead of the plural: “The governor convened his most trusted adviser, economist Olivia Schneider, and polling expert Carlton Torres.”

With “adviser” in the singular, the Oxford comma doesn’t prevent confusion — it creates it. Maybe Schneider and the trusted adviser are one and the same, so the governor convened only two people. Or maybe the trusted adviser is separate from Schneider and three people showed up. We don’t know. But take out the Oxford comma and it’s clear that three people met with the governor: the trusted adviser, Schneider and Torres.

Obviously, sometimes it’s better to just rewrite the sentence. But when you can’t, knee-jerk comma partisanship is not the remedy. Sometimes the Oxford comma helps, sometimes it hurts.

Consistency counts, too. So pick your default preference — yes or no on the Oxford comma — then be prepared to make exceptions whenever it could help your reader.

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