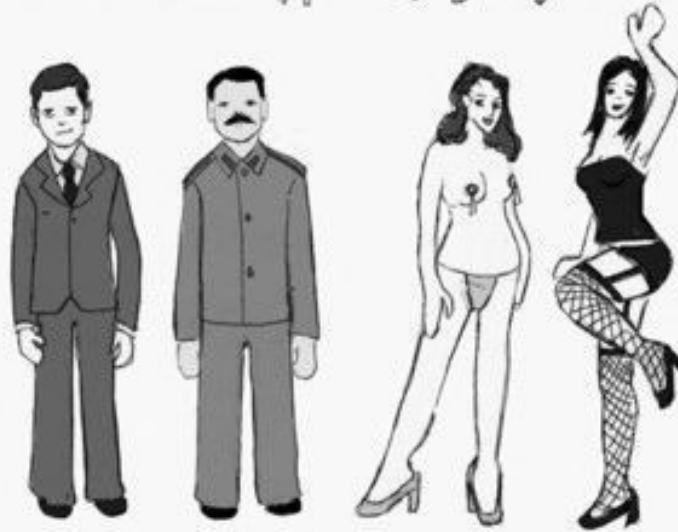


The Oxford Comma

With the Oxford comma:
we invited the strippers, jfk, and stalin.



Without the Oxford comma:
we invited the strippers, jfk and stalin.



The Oxford Comma

The Oxford comma—also referred to as the serial comma, series comma, or Harvard comma—is a comma placed immediately before the coordinating conjunction (e.g. “and” or “or”) in a series of three or more items (i.e. words, compounds, phrases, or clauses). For example, here’s a sentence using the Oxford comma between proper nouns: “My favorite poets are Whitman, Dickinson, and Stevens.” (Without the Oxford comma, the same sentence looks like this: “My favorite poets are Whitman, Dickinson and Stevens.”)

Using verb phrases, here’s another example: “President Trump on Twitter today insulted the Secretary of State, promoted a complimentary biography of himself, and once again called the investigation into the possibility of Russian collusion ‘fake news’.” (Without the Oxford comma, the sentence reads: “President Trump on Twitter today insulted the Secretary of State, promoted a complimentary biography of himself and once again called the investigation into the possibility of Russian collusion ‘fake news’.”)

While opinions differ as to whether the Oxford comma should be adopted at all times, most style guides argue for its consistent use—including those American references most often cited with regards to the conventions academic writing such as *The MLA Handbook*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. (British resources that advocate the Oxford comma include, as one might expect, *The Oxford Style Manual*, which ensures consistency among the titles published by Oxford University Press, and *Modern Research Association Style Guide*.) Additionally, both the U.S. Government Printing Office and the storied *The Elements of Style* encourage use of the Oxford comma. That said, there are some style guides of note—including those of the Associated Press, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*—that oppose its mandatory use.

In fact, the sole argument for *not* using the Oxford comma seems to be that in rare instances its use creates ambiguity (as in this example): “I would like to thank my mother, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman for their inspiration.” In this instance, the Oxford comma creates an appositive, suggesting that the writer’s mother is Emily Dickinson. By revising the sentence, one can easily avoid this pitfall: “I would like to thank Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and my mother for their inspiration.”

So what ought the student writer of academic English at LMU do? Well, while one will inevitably encounter good writing that consistently avoids the Oxford comma—say, in *The New York Times*, which is another outlier in this regard—its usage, especially in academic quarters, grows ever more ubiquitous: So, whether you’re writing a post on Facebook, penning a love poem over coffee at Lost Weekend, or revising your thesis statement for the twenty-seventh time, we encourage you to use the Oxford comma.