

Commas in a List

The Serial Comma

- *The chief terminal punctuation marks are the period, the question mark and the exclamation mark.*

Correct alternative:

- *The chief terminal punctuation marks are the period, the question mark, and the exclamation mark.*

Possible Ambiguities

The second example uses a “serial” or “Oxford” comma before “and.” Style manuals disagree about the use of the serial comma, but all agree that lists of words should be ordered and punctuated carefully to avoid ambiguity.

- *I dedicate my book to my parents, Jane Urquhart and Monty.*
Without the serial comma, this sentence means that the writer’s parents are Jane Urquhart and Monty the Mount mascot.
The serial comma (after Urquhart) would show that these are three separate dedications.

Reordering is often a better way to avoid ambiguity:

- *I dedicate my book to Jane Urquhart, Monty, and my parents.*
- *She travels with Jambusters, a murder mystery and a fantasy.*
This sentence could mean that she travels with one book, which is both a murder mystery and a fantasy; its title is *Jambusters*.
It could also mean that she travels with three books: *Jambusters*, a murder mystery, and a fantasy.

The serial comma does not really help in this case:

- *She travels with Jambusters, a murder mystery, and a fantasy.*
It could mean that *Jambusters* is a murder mystery, and her second book is a fantasy.
It could also mean that she travels with three books.

Solutions:

Three books:

- *She travels with a murder mystery, a fantasy, and Jambusters.*

Two books:

- *She travels with Jambusters (a murder mystery) and a fantasy.*

One book:

- *She travels with Jambusters (a murder mystery and a fantasy).*