



Disruptive and Orphaned Commas

Disruptive Commas

Disruptive commas are not like disruptive behavior—making a commotion, banging on furniture or walls, throwing things, loudly arguing, heckling, and so on—in a classroom or a restaurant or a comedy club. They are not “bad” in that way. They are not uncivil. They are bad merely in the grammatical sense: superfluous, non-functional, disruptive of the logical flow of a sentence. They should be eliminated, but not with reprimand.

Disruptive commas occur usually where there are natural “seams” in sentences, that is, where separate grammatical elements of a sentence are fitted together but where there is no logical or grammatical warrant for a comma. In such instances, we may pause when we are speaking the sentence in conversation, stopping briefly to consider what we want to say next as we compose our sentences “off the cuff” or to take a breath or add dramatic emphasis (“Wait for it!”). This speech pause phenomenon haunts our writing; it is no doubt the cause of most disruptive commas in our essays. The ear tricks us.

There are three typical locations where this comma fault occurs:

- 1) Between the subject and the main verb of the sentence;

Doing not enough, is worse than doing nothing.

Where the subject phrase “doing not enough” meets the verb “is” lies one of these grammatical seams, as between the sleeve and shoulder of a shirt. Like seams in clothing, such grammatical couplings should not be specially marked. No comma.

The error occurs often when the subject is compound (more than one subject word, with serial commas):

Kindness, patience, and love, would make the world a safer place than any
Second Amendment restrictions.

The first two commas are correct; the third is disruptive.

And when the subject extensively modified:

The slope of the hill where the parachutist got caught in a tree, became steeper
as it descended toward the creek.

The subject of this sentence is “slope.” It is modified by the prepositional phrase “of the hill,” and “hill” is then itself modified by the adjective clause “where the parachutist got caught in a tree”--all of this before we reach the main verb: “became.” Quite naturally, a speaker might want to pause, having completed such a complex maneuver, but a writer should not. There is no reason to.

Disruptive commas are also common when the subject is a noun clause:

Where the CEO was sitting at the banquet yesterday, generated a great deal of gossip in the offices this morning.

“Where the CEO was sitting. . .” is a relative clause. Such clauses can and often do function as nouns--here as the subject of the sentence. In such cases, they are called noun clauses. When we employ a noun clause in this way, there is a great tendency to place a comma where the clause meets the verb of the sentence, but this placement is a mistake. No comma.

2) Between nouns in compound subjects or between compound verbs;

Lying, and cheating make the world go around, thinks the cynic.

A compound subject by definition contains two or more nouns, in the above example “lying” and “cheating.” If there are three or more nouns in a compound subject, we use serial commas:

Lying, cheating, and government regulation make the world go around. . . .

but we do not use a comma if there are just two nouns joined simply by the conjunction “and.” Again, a speech pause is the ghost in the attic here. When we are speaking, we may want to pause for emphasis on the second subject or perhaps on “and,” but there is no grammatical justification for a comma in this location.

This kind of disruptive comma occurs quite frequently where correlative conjunctions (either/or, neither/nor) are employed in compound subjects:

Neither the Lakers, nor the Suns will win the Western Division.

Speech pause.

The same issue arises in compound verbs (more than one main verb in the sentence):

Teachers who both guide, and inspire students should be rewarded first.

The adjective clause in this sentence has two verbs: “guide” and “inspire.” There should be no comma between them. As with compound subjects, however, if we deploy three or more verbs, we would use serial commas:

Teachers who guide, inspire, and advocate for their students should be rewarded first.

3) After the coordinating conjunction, especially “but,” in a compound sentence.

English teachers know this error well. Disruptive commas abound following coordinating conjunctions in compound sentences. “But” seems especially conducive to this mistake, but it occurs regularly with all of the FANBOYS.

Eloise wanted to buy her mother’s birthday present before the weekend but, she had to wait for her paycheck to be deposited on Friday.

Shall we sound like a broken record? Again we hear the repossession of punctuation principles by a habit of speech, in this instance what is referred to as “the pregnant pause”: we land hard on the conjunction, then wait a moment to conjure a little suspense:

Eloise wanted to buy her mother’s birthday present before the weekend BUT . . .

In writing, a comma must precede the coordinating conjunction, not follow it:

Eloise wanted to buy her mother’s birthday present before the weekend, but she had to wait for her paycheck to be deposited on Friday.

Further examples of the error:

It is not possible to improve people’s behavior by enlightenment so, we must legislate.

You can take the Amtrak to Philadelphia or, you may prefer to hitchhike.

We slogged through a miserable winter yet, we were happy in each other’s company.

The error appears frequently in a variant form, where the conjunction and the second clause are separated off as an independent sentence.

You can take the Amtrak to Philadelphia. Or, you may prefer to hitchhike.

This arrangement represents a point of debate among experts: some teachers and editors find it acceptable to begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction, while many do not. Technically, a coordinating conjunction attached to the beginning of a clause renders the clause dependent; the second clause is thus a fragment. Wherever one may stand on this minor dispute, the comma following the conjunction is disruptive and should be removed.

On this type of disruptive comma, quick and easy advice is available: grammar checkers are good at catching it and offering the proper correction. Students should click on the blue underline and accept the suggestion.

Note: disruptive commas occur in other locations, but these we've just explored represent the most common incidences.

Orphaned Commas (unpaired)

Some commas are like parentheses; they come in pairs. If you have one, you must have the other. (They are correlatives: one does not make sense without the other.) An "orphaned" comma error occurs when one of the pair is missing. The remaining "unpaired" comma sits in a state of incompleteness and semi-function. We call such commas "orphaned" for lack of a better term. The analogy is admittedly inapt, as these commas have lost something more like their twin brother or sister than like their parents. Unfortunately, just as English has no word for a person who has lost their only sibling, there is no generally accepted term among grammarians for this type of comma fault. Let's just say such commas, like such people, are forlorn.

The deployment of such comma pairs in a sentence is often referred to as "bracketing" or "setting off" material--in particular, setting off phrases and dependent clauses that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. (See ASC handout "Essential and Non-essential Elements" for further discussion and examples of this principle.) The orphaned comma error, as we've said, occurs when one of the bracketing commas is dropped. There are primarily three locations where this error is likely to happen:

1) With direct address phrases;

When we speak directly to someone in a sentence, whether by name or with some other identifying noun, we "set off" the addressing phrase:

You need not take the blame, Arnold, for the unpredictable behavior of your children.

I can only hope, dear reader, that you continue to follow me on my winding path.

Here is an orphaned comma:

I can only hope dear reader, that you continue to follow me. . . .

It is safe to say that, in general, when writers make this mistake, the first comma is the one that falls away because the second pause has a bit more weight. However, either comma can be orphaned if its "twin" is omitted.

2) With non-essential distributed free modifiers;

“Distributed” in this context means “placed within a clause” rather than before the clause (as an introductory element) or after it (as an afterthought.) There are many types of free modifiers:

conjunctive adverbs

prepositional phrases

participial phrases

among others.

They are called “free” because they can move about in a sentence; a writer can choose to place them almost anywhere, often as close as possible to the object they are modifying, as long as the placement does not disrupt the syntax. When these modifiers are located somewhere in the middle of a clause and are non-essential, they are set off with commas:

The barbershop, consequently, had to be sold.

Frank and Jean were delighted, despite their show of sadness, by the departure of their neighbors.

The term “impressionist,” suggesting French influence, would not be fitting to describe the work of an artist so steeped in southwestern American landscapes.

Again, it is often the first comma that is dropped:

Frank and Jean were delighted despite their show of sadness, by the departure of their neighbors.

The remaining comma, then, is an orphan.

3) With non-essential adjective clauses.

An adjective clause contains a subject and a verb and modifies a noun in the sentence. If the clause is essential to the reader’s understanding of the identity of that noun, then it is considered an essential grammatical element and is not set off with commas. If, on the other hand, it provides added information that could be omitted without loss of clarity or definition, then it is a non-essential element and is bracketed.

Here’s an example of sentence containing an essential adjective clause:

The theater where President Lincoln was shot was closed to tours that day.

The clause “where President Lincoln was shot” is crucial to our understanding of the noun “theater.” Absent that clause, the sentence would be impossibly vague: what theater?

Example of a sentence containing a non-essential adjective clause:

Ford’s Theater, where President Lincoln was shot, was closed to tours that day.

It’s the same clause, but now “Ford’s Theater” specifies the theater the writer is referring to; the adjective clause is no longer necessary to our understanding of this reference.

An orphaned comma fault can occur when the adjective clause is distributed, that is, situated somewhere in the middle of the main clause, as with the free modifiers discussed above. Set off commas in such instances, as we’ve explained, come in pairs. If one of the commas is missing, the other is orphaned:

Ford’s Theater where President Lincoln was shot, was closed to tours that day.

Once again, the first comma of the pair is the one more often dropped.

Disruptive or Orphaned? An Editor’s Puzzle

Our “Ford’s Theater” example gives rise to an interesting possible ambiguity facing both students and teachers: a disruptive comma and an orphaned comma can appear to be identical; they are both single-comma faults and can occur at exactly the same point in a sentence. Let’s review a couple of common locations of these errors:

Disruptive comma: between the subject and the main verb of a sentence.

Orphaned comma: following a non-essential adjective clause located somewhere in the middle of the main clause. That location may very well be between the subject and the main verb, with the adjective clause modifying the subject. The “Ford’s Theater” sentence above is a typical case.

Exactly the same place!

Consider these two sentences:

- 1) Any homeowners who have an interest in contributing to the Rosewood Lakes community by serving on the Board of Directors, should submit their nominating documents by the end of the month.
- 2) Reporters with degrees in journalism who have presumably taken courses in journalistic ethics, should be considered more credible sources of information than online influencers.

Each sentence contains a comma fault. One is disruptive, the other is orphaned. Which is which? The answer lies in the principle of essentiality. Is the adjective clause in each sentence (beginning with “who”) essential or non-essential? The comma is orphaned if there should be two commas surrounding the clause (clause is non-essential); it’s disruptive if there should be none (clause is essential).

The answer: the comma in sentence 1) is disruptive; it should not be there. The adjective clause “who have an interest . . .” is essential; it limits the subject, “homeowners,” to a narrower category; if the clause were removed, we would no longer know that the sentence concerns only these “interested” homeowners. The comma in sentence 2) is orphaned; it is missing its “other half.” The clause “who have presumably taken courses. . .” is non-essential; it tells us something additional about “reporters with degrees”--that as journalism students they have all taken courses in journalistic ethics (presumably); it thus explains further the reasoning of the sentence, but there would be no confusion about which reporters we are talking about were the adjective clause deleted.

In brief, then, the distinction between essential and non-essential lies in the difference between “only some” and “all.” In sentence 1), the adjective clause describes “only some” homeowners; in sentence 2), the adjective clause describes “all” reporters with degrees in journalism.

Here are the sentences corrected:

- 1) Any homeowners who have an interest in contributing to the Rosewood Lakes community by serving on the Board of Directors should submit their nominating documents by the end of the month.
- 2) Reporters with degrees in journalism, who have presumably taken courses in journalistic ethics, should be considered more credible sources of information than online influencers.

This “same location” phenomenon can occur at other sites in sentences where we find a single-comma fault. In such cases, the error lies either in the absence of a comma or the presence of one. Students must understand the principle of essentiality to determine which.

Practice

Let’s try our hand. Read the following sentences and observe the comma in each. In the space following the sentence, write D for disruptive comma, O for orphaned comma, or C if the comma is correct.

- 1) We require all park visitors who bring their own camp stoves, to use designated campgrounds. ____

- 2) The north shore of Lake Margaret where numerous drownings have occurred recently, has been permanently closed. _____
- 3) Many engineers worked on the design of the bridge but, only one conceived the original suspension principle. _____
- 4) You'll need to call ahead for a reservation David, if you want a table by the window. _____
- 5) Sitting alone in a dark room for hours, will only lead to madness. _____
- 6) Johnny solved the "chaos" equation in five minutes, and then he ate a tuna sandwich. _____
- 7) Henry James both cherished, and dreaded his brother William's editorial opinions. _____
- 8) People of the Earth, we come in peace. _____
- 9) The proposal to rezone a section of the desert preserve for residential use which has been the subject of angry debate at recent council meetings, has been tabled for now. _____
- 10) Where our children are tonight, is anybody's guess. _____

Answer key on next page.

- 1) D
- 2) O
- 3) D
- 4) O
- 5) D
- 6) C
- 7) D
- 8) C
- 9) O
- 10) D