

Commas and Semicolons in a Series

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Authorities speak of “open” and “close” punctuation. (Pronounced clōs, not clōz.)

- Open: *The flag is red, white and blue.*
- Close: *The flag is red, white, and blue.*

Most authorities accept only the close form: *Chicago Manual of Style*, *Strunk and White*, *Webster II*, *Time Almanac*, etc. All insist on the close form if the phrases are long.

Journalists, however, following the *Associated Press Stylebook*, omit the comma before *and* when the phrases are short. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* explains. In the sentence “French, German, Italian and Spanish are taught,” the two commas take the place of *and*; a comma after *Italian* would serve no purpose. Fowler agrees, though, that the final comma may sometimes be needed to avoid ambiguity: *The smooth grey of the beech stem, the silky texture of the birch, and the rugged pine*. “If there is no comma after *birch*, the pine is given a silky texture. The use of the comma before the *and* is here recommended.”

The possibilities of ambiguity, it seems, have persuaded most authorities to call for close punctuation invariably. If you still prefer the open form, as many good writers do, at least use a comma before the *and* when misreading is possible or the phrases are long. Though editors tend to be compulsive, few would alter *red, white and blue*.

The same principles apply to use of the semicolon in a series, where the separated phrases contain internal punctuation. *The French flag is blue, white, and red; the Russian, white, blue, and red; and the Italian, green, white, and red*. In any case, don’t replace the last semicolon with a comma.

Three or more clauses can be linked by commas: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom . . .”—Dickens. But the use of a comma to link two clauses is forbidden (“comma splice”) except when they are very short: “Sighted sub, sank same.”—D.F. Mason, radio message to U.S. Navy base, 1942.

Some further points

- *Or* is treated the same as *and*. *He accepted no ifs, ands, or buts.*
- Don’t use commas when the elements are simple and joined by conjunctions. *It makes no difference whether you use nails or screws or bolts.*
- *Etc.* used after a series should be followed by a comma. *The guests brought salads, beverages, desserts, etc., and placed them on the table.* (But avoid *etc.* in fiction.)

- When referring to the title of a company, law firm, or the like, don't edit the punctuation: *Burgess, Harrell, Mancuse, Olson & Colton*.
- The final conjunction can often be omitted: *She reads novels, plays, poems*.
- Be consistent.