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**Comma Usage Explained**

**By Michael LaRocca**

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COMMA USAGE EXPLAINED

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Don't they drive you nuts?

You can visit all the rules of style you want, and you can read all the books and articles you want. You will still be confused. You will see inconsistency. You will see experts who don't agree with each other. And, you'll pull out your hair. Unless you're Michael, since my hair's falling out all by itself. I think it'd do that even if I weren't an editor hunting down errant commas.

Well, folks, here are some rules. A bare minimum. Internalize these and ignore everybody else.

(1) Never put a comma between a subject and a verb. It's always wrong. The dog, barked. What is that? Idiocy. I'm sorry, but it is. Read it aloud, and pause at the comma. Don't you feel stupid?

(2) If you want to separate a clause, put a comma on both sides of it. Otherwise, no commas at all. "The dog, who held a bone in his mouth, ran to the porch." See how there's a comma on both sides? That's because you could skip that whole clause entirely and it'd still be a complete sentence. "The dog ran to the porch."

If I delete the first comma, I have to delete the second one. You decide which looks best, two commas or none. But, one comma doesn't work. Try deleting either one and reading the result aloud, remembering to pause at the comma. It's a wreck, isn't it? You don't talk like that, so don't write like that.

(3) "He saw the cat, the cat was on the couch." This is not a good sentence. It's two sentences. The one before the comma has subject object verb, and so does the one after the comma.

Run-ons like that can emphasize the run-on nature of a character's words or thoughts, but use the device sparingly. It's okay to break a rule, as long as you know what it is and

why you're breaking it.

But in the example above, it'd be best to make them two sentences. If you find you just can't do it, consider a semicolon. Don't believe anyone who says semicolons aren't allowed in fiction. I wouldn't use one in the sample sentence, but I've used them in other sentences I've written. Sparingly.

But for something as lame as a sentence about a cat on a couch, it's best to follow the rules exactly and make that two sentences. Do you really think your reader's gonna pop off for a beer or a toilet break between them and lose his place? As long as they're in the same paragraph, they'll be read together.

(4) And finally, THE rule. It works for narrative and it works for dialogue. Read what you've written aloud. Wherever you would pause for breath, whack in a comma. Because, you have internalized the rules. You've been speaking English all your life. But as an aspiring writer, you've been so busy trying to learn "the rules" that you've forgotten the rule you've known all along. And you do know it!

If you'd like, you can look over some sentences in the preceding paragraphs. You'll note some commas where they're not strictly necessary. Often, it's where I begin a sentence with a conjunction, also an alleged no-no. But that device can be used sparingly to emphasize a point. And when I do that, sometimes I whip in a comma for extra emphasis. A comma is a pause. That's what you should note if you indulge in this exercise. I'm pausing for emphasis. Read my sentences aloud. Pause at every comma. The rhythm works. It's how I talk, and you won't be all

freaked out and confused as you listen because I paused in funny places.

Speaking as an editor, I run into a lot of writers who have problems with commas. Heck, speaking as someone who likes to read books and newspapers and magazines, I see commas where they shouldn't be, or missing commas where they should be. It's because we're trying to be too fancy, drifting dangerously far from the "write what you know" mantra because we think we're stupid.

We're not stupid. As Sean Connery noted in *FINDING FORRESTER*, critics spend a day destroying what they couldn't create in a lifetime. That's also what I think of people who want us to memorize hundreds of silly rules about commas. They're pauses. Nothing more, nothing less. Pause where you want to pause, not where you think someone else thinks you're supposed to pause.

Wanna know who's the best at this whole comma business? Sports journalists. Some of them make up words, are given to hyperbole, and are guilty of many other sins. But they get their commas right. (Maybe they have good editors?) You can read what they wrote and dang near hear their voices. You know what they said and what they meant to say, and you can agree with them or be totally outraged by them.

And that is, after all, what writing is. Telepathy. I'm in Shaoxing and you are not, and you're reading this many days after I wrote it, but you know what I'm thinking. Stray commas would be a barrier to that. Good writers don't like barriers.

Just remember that a comma is a pause, and pause wherever you think you should. Blow off the rules—there are too many and they just keep changing—and trust your gut. If you do that, I think you'll find that when you seek out publication, and find yourself working with an editor, you'll hear very little about your commas.

Michael LaRocca's website at <http://freereads.topcities.com> was chosen by *WRITER'S DIGEST* as one of The 101 Best Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. He published four novels in 2002 and has two more scheduled for publication in 2004. He also works as an editor for an e-publisher. He teaches English at a university in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, and publishes the free weekly newsletter *Mad About Books*.

## **Apostrophe Usage Explained**

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#### **APOSTROPHE USAGE EXPLAINED**

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According to one of my previous articles, whenever a Southerner says "Y'all watch this," get out of the way because those are probably the last words he will ever say.

Well, I am a Southerner. I used to live in the southern US, but I moved to south China. And, I'm about to say the magic words:

Y'all watch this.

The word is "week." If I want to talk about more than one week, like I did near the end of the previous article, I'll use weeks. No apostrophe. If I want to talk about something belonging to a week, such as "last week's newsletter," I'll use an apostrophe.

That's the rule. If it's a noun, s makes it plural and apostrophe-s makes it possessive. It's just that simple.

If I were still in the US, and I wanted one of those fancy carved signs that are so common on southern lawns, it would not read "The LaRocca's." The LaRocca's what? His lawn? His sign? That apostrophe makes it singular possessive, so The LaRocca is surely claiming ownership of something. If that was not his intent, and he whacked in an apostrophe anyway, he's an idiot.

What about plural possessive? Is it "the LaRoccas' house" or "the LaRoccas's house?" Well, it's neither, since my wife isn't a LaRocca and we don't own a house. But for the sake of this article, pretend she is and we do.

In ON WRITING, Stephen King swears it's LaRoccas's. When I was a student, my teachers swore it was LaRoccas'. As an editor, I've heard the first was US standard and the second was UK standard. And the answer is, I don't care. Just be consistent.

I once met an editor who said that the spelling has something to do with the pronunciation. She's an idiot. Spelling isn't 100% pronunciation. It's history. I'll say LaRoccas-zz whether

it's LaRoccas' or LaRoccas's. So will you.

Jump up five paragraphs and read the seventh word. Noun. Note that I didn't write pronoun. Just for fun, the rule for pronouns and apostrophes is completely different, as I noted in my Common Writing Mistakes article. I still get email praising that one, so let me repeat a little bit of it.

It's is a contraction for "it is" and its is possessive. Who's is a contraction for "who is" and whose is possessive. You're is a contraction for "you are" and your is possessive. They're is a contraction for "they are," there is a place, their is possessive. There's is a contraction for "there is" and theirs is possessive.

If you've been paying attention to the above examples, you've noticed that possessive pronouns never use apostrophes. Its, whose, your, yours, their, theirs...

And there you have it. Apostrophe usage explained.

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