



Serial boxing

By Jeffrey Barg
aka The Angry Grammarian
Managing Editor

Punctuation Man's got a lotta damn gall.

I was having a perfectly pleasant National Grammar Day last week (happy NGD to you too, by the way; did you get me anything?), when his treasonous press release arrived: "Punctuation Man breaks with Associated Press, endorses serial comma."

Say what?

"Chill," says Punctuation Man, aka Jeff Rubin, over the phone from his Left Coast home. "I mean, it's not like I endorsed Hillary Clinton. Come on, it's a comma!"

Say what you will, but I've never known Hillary Clinton to have such effrontery when it comes to the English language.

"If she gets elected, she'll have more opportunities to disgrace the English language," Rubin asserts. But she'd be hard pressed to top the English desecration of the last eight years.

Before he emblazoned a question mark across his chest and began indoctrinating young'uns with apostrophe awesomeness, Rubin was a journalist. By trade, all journalists eschew the serial comma.

"I was brought up on the AP Stylebook—it's my religion," says Punctuation Man of the guide used in nearly every newsroom in America. "Yet a lot of teachers send me examples of sentences where a serial comma makes it more clear."

Of course there will always be circumstances that require breaking the rule: "For lunch I had ham and eggs, mac and cheese and peanut butter and jelly." Or "I'd like to thank my parents, Jesus and Ayn Rand." But find a single English rule that doesn't need breaking once in a while.

In your average list of three things—“red, white and blue,” “the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker”—the extra comma forces a pause where it isn’t necessary.

“Jeff, what’s your hurry?” Punctuation Man pleads. “Slow down. Take a breath. Smell the coordinating conjunction.” He thinks it’d be too difficult to make a list of the rare occasions when a serial comma is allowed.

“Who makes that decision? The president of the United States?” he asks. But we agree on the next thing he says: “Bush probably thinks a serial comma is something shaped like a comma that you eat for breakfast.”

— *Hear the entire interview with Punctuation Man at www.theangrygrammarian.com, episode #17*