PERSONAL HISTORY
FEBRUARY 23, 2015 ISSUE

HOLY WRIT

Learning to love the house style.

BY MARY NORRIS

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN; KAREN A. RACZ / COURTESY THE AUTHOR

I didn't set out to be a comma queen. The first job I ever had, the summer I was fifteen, was checking feet at a public pool in Cleveland. I was a "key girl"—"Key personnel" was the job title on my pay stub. I never knew what that was supposed to mean. I was not in charge of any keys, and my position was by no means crucial to the

operation of the pool, although I did clean the bathrooms. Swimmers had to follow an elaborate ritual before getting into the pool: tuck your hair into a hideous bathing cap (if you were a girl), shower, wade through a footbath spiked with disinfectant that tinted your feet orange, and stand in line to have your toes checked. This took place at a special wooden bench, like those things that shoe salesmen use, except that instead of a miniature sliding board and a size stick for the customer's foot it had a stick with a foot-shaped platform on top. The prospective swimmer put one foot at a time on the platform and, leaning forward, used his fingers to spread out his toes so that the foot checker could make sure he didn't have athlete's foot. Only then could he pass into the pool. I have never heard of foot checkers in any city besides Cleveland.

I am not particularly nostalgic about my foot-checking days. Nor do I wish to revisit my time at the Cleveland Costume Company, where I worked after graduation. I had gone to Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers, in New Jersey, and returned ignominiously to Cleveland because I couldn't think of anything better to do. The costume company was fun for a while. I stuck it out through the Christmas season, and then I called a local dairy and asked whether there were any openings for milkmen.

I had had a fantasy for years about owning a dairy farm. I liked cows: they led a placid yet productive life. "We've never had a lady drive a milk truck, but there's no reason not," a man at the plant said. The route they gave me was in Fairview Park, a suburb west of Cleveland. The milk truck had two sets of pedals, one with the standard three for a stick shift, for driving sitting down when you were going long distances, and the other for driving standing up, when you were hopping between houses.

I had half a mind to stay in Cleveland and try to marry the boss's son (he raised beef cattle), but I gave up the milk route to get a master's in English at the University of Vermont. One summer, I worked nights in a cheese factory, packaging mozzarella. A team of women, wearing white rubber aprons, yellow rubber gloves, green rubber boots, and hairnets, pulled bricks of mozzarella out of vats of cold salt water, labelled them, bagged them, sealed the bags, boxed the cheese, and stacked the boxes. I had a secret yen to operate the forklift truck. Also, while in graduate school, I started reading *The New Yorker*.

I sometimes visited one of my brothers, who lived in New York. He had gone to the Art Students League, where he made friends with a woman in his portrait class named Jeanne Fleischmann. She was married to Peter Fleischmann, the chairman of the board of *The New Yorker*. His father, Raoul Fleischmann, had been the co-founder of the magazine, with Harold Ross. On one visit, I picked up a copy of the magazine. It was dated February 24, 1975. Eustace Tilley was on the cover, and the contents included a piece by E. B. White: "Letter from the East." It was the anniversary issue—*The New Yorker's* fiftieth.

Eventually, I met the Fleischmanns. I was doing research for my master's thesis, on James Thurber, and while Peter was away on business he let me sit in his office and look through bound volumes of the magazine. At the Morgan Library, in an exhibit of books that had belonged to writers, I found a grammar mistake on the wall label accompanying Thurber's copy of Hemingway's "Green Hills of Africa," in which he had made pencil drawings of Papa and Memsahib on safari. I was given permission to examine the book. (I made freehand copies of the illustrations and appended them to my thesis. My examiners were not amused.) In Vermont, I kept two stacks of magazines on my lobster-crate coffee table, one of *Hoard's Dairyman* and one of *The New Yorker*.

I made up my mind to move to New York in the fall of 1977. I drove there in my old Plymouth, with my cat, my books pared down to the bare essentials, and two hundred dollars. The Fleischmanns, whose grown children had moved out, were still in parental mode, and they befriended me readily. I spent many a cocktail hour in their den, drinking their Heineken and listening to Peter's stories. Peter drank Scotch-and-water, chain-smoked, and swallowed Maalox by the handful. He told war stories (he was in the Battle of the Bulge) and stories about Yale and about his father, Raoul (the family came from Austria), and croquet games with Harpo Marx making an impossible shot by sawing up a tire and wrapping it around a tree trunk.

That fall, I had a reverse commute from the financial district to Paterson, New Jersey, where I was washing dishes in a friend's restaurant. The friend paid my bus fare and gave me all the beer I could drink. In return, I tried not to throw away the silverware when I scraped the dishes. Often, I got off the bus on the way home and walked over the George Washington Bridge. I worked on my thesis, and sometimes despaired. Peter pointed out that even if I never finished the thesis or got the master's degree, it was no reason to despair. Peter had no influence in the editorial department—like his father, he kept business and editorial strictly separate. But he offered to call Robert Bingham, the executive editor, and ask him to talk with me. We met, and Bingham was very nice, but there were no openings.

I quit the dishwashing job and worked as a cashier at Korvettes during the Christmas rush. I could not figure out whether to be sad or relieved when the management did not recognize my talent and keep me on. I did temp work. I was on the verge of trying to get a hack license so that I could drive a cab when Peter, possibly sensing an ambulance in my future, suggested that I give Bingham a follow-up call.

There was an opening! Two, in fact, one in the typing pool and one in the editorial library. I flunked the test for the typing pool. It was on an electric typewriter, and I was used to a manual—at least, that was my excuse. If my hands trembled over the keyboard, the typewriter took off without me. The other interview went better. Once I got a whiff of the library—that bookish, dusty, paste-and-paper smell so peculiar to libraries—I felt that I was in my element. Helen Stark, who was only the second person ever to be in charge of the library, had a noble head—you could see her profile on a coin—and strong features. She and three girls sat at desks that faced each other in a cloverleaf arrangement. Helen gave me a typing test—on a manual typewriter, cramming words onto an index card (I aced it)—and borrowed an empty office for the interview. I remember her arranging her skirt, which was black and wide at the hem, when she crossed her legs. (My skirt was a forest-green Danskin wraparound that a friend had picked up at a thrift shop in New Jersey, and I didn't realize until the next time I wore it that one end of the hem hung some eight inches longer than the other.) I was all aglow, and Helen warned me that it was not a glamorous job. But she knew from experience that nothing she said could dim my enthusiasm or overturn my conviction that I would soon be one of the "young friends" whose "letters" were published in The Talk of the Town.

I started work on Monday, typing summaries of the fiction in that week's issue and indexing it under key words. As Helen and I were leaving that night, an editor named Pat Crow got on the elevator at the eighteenth floor with us. I noticed his boots—big mud-green rubber boots—and said, "Those are the kind of boots we wore in the cheese factory." He looked at Helen and said, "So this is the next stop after the cheese factory?"

Eventually, I became what was known as a collator—a Bartleby-like occupation that computers have since done away with. In collating, you used a pencil to carefully transfer changes from various

proofs from the editor, the author, the proofreaders (usually two), the lawyer, and the fact checker onto a clean proof for the printer. It was not a job I was born for: it demanded legible handwriting, and my penmanship had been deteriorating since third grade. But you learned how the place ran: collating was the nexus, it was where everything came together.

The big challenge in collating was what were called Gould proofs. Eleanor Gould was *The New Yorker's* head grammarian and query proofreader. She was a certified genius—a member not just of Mensa but of some übergroup within Mensa—and the magazine's editor-in-chief at the time, William Shawn, had complete faith in her. She read everything in galley—everything except fiction, that is, which she had been taken off of years earlier, as I understood it, because she treated everyone the same, be it Marcel Proust or Annie Proulx or Vladimir Nabokov. Clarity was Eleanor's lodestar, "Fowler's Modern English" her bible, and by the time she was done with a proof the pencil lines on it looked like dreadlocks. Some of the fact pieces were ninety columns long, and Mr. Shawn took every query. My all-time favorite Eleanor Gould query was on Christmas Gifts for Children: the writer had repeated the old saw that every Raggedy Ann doll has "I love you" written on her little wooden heart, and Eleanor wrote in the margin that it did not, and she knew, because as a child she had performed open-heart surgery on her rag doll and seen with her own eyes that nothing was written on the heart.

Then I was allowed to work on the copydesk. It changed the way I read prose—I was paid to find mistakes, and it was a long time before I could once again read for pleasure. I spontaneously copy-edited everything I laid eyes on. I had a paperback edition of Faulkner's "The Hamlet" that was so riddled with typos that it almost ruined Flem Snopes for me. But, as I relaxed on the copydesk, I was sometimes even able to enjoy myself. There were writers who weren't very good and yet were impossible to improve, like figure skaters who

hit all the technical marks but have a limited artistic appeal and sport unflattering costumes. There were competent writers on interesting subjects who were just careless enough in their spelling and punctuation to keep a girl occupied. And there were writers whose prose came in so highly polished that I couldn't believe I was getting paid to read them: John Updike, Pauline Kael, Mark Singer, Ian Frazier! In a way, these were the hardest, because the prose lulled me into complacency. They transcended the office of the copy editor. It was hard to stay alert for opportunities to meddle in an immaculate manuscript, yet if you missed something you couldn't use that as an excuse. The only thing to do was style the spelling, and even that could be fraught. Oliver Sacks turned out to be attached to the spelling of "sulphur" and "sulphuric" that he remembered from his chemistry experiments as a boy. (*The New Yorker* spells it less romantically: "sulfur," "sulfuric.")

When Pauline Kael typed "prevert" instead of "pervert," she meant "prevert" (unless she was reviewing something by Jacques Prévert). Luckily, she was kind, and if you changed it she would just change it back and stet it without upbraiding you. Kael revised up until closing, and though we lackeys resented writers who kept changing "doughnut" to "coffee cake" then back to "doughnut" and then "coffee cake" again, because it meant more work for us, Kael's changes were always improvements. She approached me once with a proof in her hand. She couldn't figure out how to fix something, and I was the only one around. She knew me from chatting in the ladies' room on the eighteenth floor. I looked at the proof and made a suggestion, and she was delighted. "You helped me!" she gasped.

I was on the copydesk when John McPhee's pieces on geology were set up. I tried to keep my head. There was not much to do. McPhee was like John Updike, in that he turned in immaculate copy. Really, all I had to do was read. I'd heard that McPhee compared his manuscript with the galleys, so anything *The New Yorker* did he noticed. I just

looked up words in the dictionary to check the spelling (which was invariably correct, but I had to check) and determined whether compound words were hyphenated, whether hyphenated words should be closed up or printed as two words, or whether I should stet the hyphen. It was my province to capitalize the "i" in Interstate 80, hyphenate I-80, and lowercase "the interstate."

In Part II of "In Suspect Terrain," I came to this sentence and thought I might have spotted an error: "But rock columns are generalized; they are atremble with hiatuses; and they depend in large part on well borings, which are shallow, and on seismic studies, which are new, and far between." The itchy-fingered copy editor hovered at the threshold. I wanted to let her in. I wasn't going to touch the comma, but I was desperate to correct that "new, and far between" to "few, and far between." I could save McPhee from making a horrible mistake! But many people with finer minds than mine were lined up to read the copy when I was through. They would not assume that "new" was a typo for "few," and if they had any doubt they could query it, asking the author through his editor, and there would be no harm done. But I was hellbent on rectifying what might be a glitch in a cliché. It was a Friday—I remember, because I knew that if I made this change I would have to live all weekend with the possibility, which could swiftly morph into a certainty, that I had made a mistake. Two mistakes: I would have gone beyond my province, and I would have introduced an error into McPhee's carefully wrought prose.

So I stayed my hand, the itchy-fingered hand with the pencil in it, and spent the weekend with a clean conscience. As soon as I left the office, I felt relieved that I had let it alone. What ever made me think that McPhee would misspell, or even mistype, the word "few"?

That was more than thirty years ago. And it has now been more than twenty years since I became a page O.K.'er—a position that exists only at *The New Yorker*, where you query-proofread pieces and

manage them, with the editor, the author, a fact checker, and a second proofreader, until they go to press. An editor once called us prose goddesses; another job description might be comma queen. Except for writing, I have never seriously considered doing anything else.

One of the things I like about my job is that it draws on the entire person: not just your knowledge of grammar and punctuation and usage and foreign languages and literature but also your experience of travel, gardening, shipping, singing, plumbing, Catholicism, Midwesternism, mozzarella, the A train, New Jersey. And in turn it feeds you more experience. The popular image of the copy editor is of someone who favors rigid consistency. I don't usually think of myself that way. But, when pressed, I do find I have strong views about commas.

The comma as we know it was invented by Aldo Manuzio, a printer working in Venice, circa 1500. It was intended to prevent confusion by separating things. In the Greek, *komma* means "something cut off," a segment. (Aldo was printing Greek classics during the High Renaissance. The comma was a Renaissance invention.) As the comma proliferated, it started generating confusion. Basically, there are two schools of thought: One plays by ear, using the comma to mark a pause, like dynamics in music; if you were reading aloud, the comma would suggest when to take a breath. The other uses punctuation to clarify the meaning of a sentence by illuminating its underlying structure. Each school believes that the other gets carried away. It can be tense and kind of silly, like the argument among theologians about how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. How many commas can fit into a sentence by Herman Melville? Or, closer to home, into a sentence from *The New Yorker*?

Even something as ostensibly simple as the serial comma can arouse strong feelings. The serial comma is the one before "and" in a series of three or more things. With the serial comma: My favorite cereals are

Cheerios, Raisin Bran, and Shredded Wheat. Without the serial comma: I used to like Kix, Trix and Wheat Chex. Proponents of the serial comma say that it is preferable because it prevents ambiguity, and I'll go along with that. Also, I'm lazy, and I find it easier to use the serial comma consistently rather than stop every time I come to a series and register whether or not the comma before the "and" preceding the last item is actually preventing ambiguity. But pressed to come up with an example of a series that was unambiguously ambiguous without the serial comma I couldn't think of a good one. An ambiguous series proved so elusive that I wondered whether perhaps we could do without the serial comma after all. In my office, this is heresy, but I will say it anyway and risk being shunned in the elevator: Isn't the "and" sufficient? After all, that's what the other commas in a series stand for: "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" A comma preceding "and" is redundant. I was at risk of becoming a comma apostate.

Fortunately, the Internet is busy with examples of series that are absurd without the serial comma:

"We invited the strippers, J.F.K. and Stalin." (This has been illustrated online, and formed the basis of a poll: which stripper had the better outfit, J.F.K. or Stalin.)

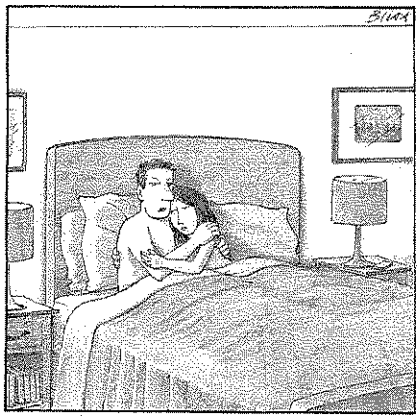
"This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God."

And there was the country-and-Western singer who was joined onstage by his two ex-wives, Kris Kristofferson and Waylon Jennings.

"Who's God?"

The bottom line is to choose one and be consistent and try not to make a moral issue out of it. Or is it? Maybe it's better to judge each series on its merits, applying the serial comma where it's needed and

suppressing it where it's not. Many newspapers, both American and British, do not use the serial comma, which underscores the idea that the news is meant to be read fast, in the dead-tree version or on the screen, because it's not news for long. It's ephemeral. Print—or, rather, text—should be streamlined and unencumbered. Maybe the day is coming when the newsfeed-style three dots (ellipsis) between items, like the eternal ribbon of news circling the building at One Times Square, will dominate, and all text will look like Céline. Certainly advertising—billboards, road signs, neon—repels punctuation. Leaving out the serial comma saves time and space. The editors of Webster's Third saved eighty pages by cutting down on commas.



But suppose you're not in a hurry. Suppose you move your lips when you read, or pronounce every word aloud in your head, and you're reading a Victorian novel or a history of Venice. You have plenty of time to crunch commas. If I worked for a publication that did not use the serial comma, I would adjust—convert from orthodox to reformed—but for now I remain loyal to the serial comma, because it actually does sometimes prevent ambiguity and because I've gotten used to the way it looks. It gives starch to the prose, and can be very effective. If a sentence were a picket fence, the serial commas would be posts at regular intervals.

The term "Oxford comma" refers to the Oxford University Press, whose house style is to use the serial comma. (The public-relations department at Oxford doesn't insist on it, however. Presumably P.R. people see it as a waste of time and space. The serial comma is a pawn in the war between town and gown.) To call it the Oxford comma

gives it a bit of class, a little snob appeal. Chances are that if you use the Oxford comma you brush the crumbs off your shirtfront before going out.

There is a fancy word for "going beyond your province": "ultracrepidate." So much of copy editing is about not going beyond your province. Anti-ultracrepidationism. Writers might think we're applying rules and sticking it to their prose in order to make it fit some standard, but just as often we're backing off, making exceptions, or at least trying to find a balance between doing too much and doing too little. A lot of the decisions you have to make as a copy editor are subjective. For instance, an issue that comes up all the time, whether to use "that" or "which," depends on what the writer means. It's interpretive, not mechanical—though the answer often boils down to an implicit understanding of commas.

Think of the great Dylan Thomas line "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." It's a bit unfair to consider this as an example, because (1) it's poetry, and we can't all write (or drink) like Dylan Thomas, and (2) nobody remembers what comes next. It goes like this: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age." A gorgeous line. Although it is verse, and quoting any more of it would confuse the issue, it nevertheless passes the test for determining whether to use "that" or "which": if the phrase or clause introduced by a relative pronoun—"that" or "which"—is essential to the meaning of the sentence, "that" is preferred, and it is not separated from its antecedent by a comma. Maybe some inferior poet would write, "The force which through the green fuse drives the flower" (the audience at his reading would snort), or, worse, "The force, which through the green fuse drives the flower, / Drives my green age" (this writer would never make it into print, unless he hired a good copy editor). "The force" has no meaning without "that through the green fuse." Take it away and you are left with "The force . . . drives my green age," leaving you to wonder,

What force? Are we watching "Star Wars"? "May the Force, which through the green fuse drives the flower, be with you." I can hear Bill Murray saying this, but not Dylan Thomas or Han Solo.

The New Yorker practices a "close" style of punctuation. Or, as E. B. White once put it, "Commas in *The New Yorker* fall with the precision of knives in a circus act, outlining the victim." If the sentence has an introductory clause (like this one), we separate it with a comma. But if the introductory clause follows a conjunction we don't. We do make exceptions for "since" or "although." If the meaning of the introductory clause is restrictive we don't use the comma. A restrictive clause does not want to be separate from what it modifies: it wants to be one with it, to be essential to it, to identify with it totally. (She was a graduate of a school that had very high standards.) Everything else is nonrestrictive. (He graduated from another school, which would admit anyone with a pulse.)

It's not always easy to decide what's restrictive. That's where judgment comes in. For instance, here is a sentence, chock-full of commas, from this magazine, that was quoted by Ben Yagoda in an online article for the *Times:* "Before Atwater died, of brain cancer, in 1991, he expressed regret." Yagoda wrote, "No other publication would put a comma after 'died' or 'cancer.' *The New Yorker* does so because otherwise (or so the thinking goes), the sentence would suggest that Atwater died multiple times and of multiple causes." He added, "That is nutty, of course." The *Times*—along with Yagoda, who teaches journalism—prefers an "open" style of punctuation, where the words stream together and every phrase or clause is of equal moment, leaving the reader to figure it out. Some readers are especially proud of their ability to figure it out and like to write letters of complaint and, put, a, comma, after, every, word, to show us the error of our ways.

Secretly, I wondered if I agreed with Yagoda. Once, when I was collating a Gould proof, I had the unsettling thought "What if Eleanor ever loses it?" What if all these commas and hyphens and subtleties of usage prove to be the products of a benign delusion? That was during the Reagan Administration, when many of us suspected that Reagan had some form of dementia, but no one could do anything about it. The country was running on automatic. What if that was the case with Eleanor and *The New Yorker*? She was getting old, and she went deaf in her later years, so she was tragically isolated from the sounds of speech that were represented in the words she groomed. There was not a single thing anyone would be able to do about it. No one would enter the copy department and say to Eleanor, "Drop the pencil and step away from the desk." We were in her thrall, as the nation was in Reagan's thrall. I jumped up and went to a colleague's office and said, "What if Eleanor goes crazy?" From the expression on her face—"You're only figuring this out now?"—I knew that we were all well advanced down the path.

Having been teased in the *Times* about *New Yorker* commas, I took a good, hard look at the magazine's policy, and I persuaded myself that in fact these commas were not indiscriminate. They marked off segments of the sentence that were not germane to the meaning. The point of the sentence Yagoda had chosen for mild ridicule, as I pointed out in an online response, is that Atwater expressed regret before he died. What he died of and when he died of it are both extra details that the author, Jane Mayer, provides only to satisfy the reader's curiosity. They aren't essential to the meaning of the sentence. They are nonrestrictive.

A while later, a reader wrote in objecting to the commas in this opening sentence of a piece by Marc Fisher: "When I was in high school, at Horace Mann, in the Bronx, in the nineteen-seventies, everyone took pride in the brilliant eccentricity of our teachers." The gist of that sentence is that at Horace Mann students enjoyed

interacting with their crazy teachers. But if all you see when you read it is the commas, you miss that. Close punctuation is not meant as a guide to stops and starts, like Dickens's and Melville's commas. *The New Yorker* isn't asking you to pause and gasp for breath at every comma. That's not what close punctuation is about. The commas are marking a thoughtful subordination of information. I really don't see how any of them could be done without. The writer went to only one high school, a very special, one-of-a-kind private school that happened to be in the Bronx, and the time that he went there was the nineteen-seventies. None of that is particularly interesting except in the context of a piece that promises to be about the bond between students and teachers. The punctuation is almost like Braille, providing a kind of bas-relief, accentuating the topography of the sentence. It looks choppy, but you don't have to chop it up when you read it. It is Aldo Manuzio's comma taken to its logical extreme. It's not insane—it's not even nutty. It's just showing what's important in the sentence in a subtle way. Another publication would let you figure it out for yourself. And, if that's what you want, you can always read some other magazine.

In the summer of 2013, in New Haven, where I had gone for the wedding of a friend, I picked up a copy of "Light Years," by James Salter. I started it in an old hotel, the Duncan, feeling slightly sad that I had never gotten to go to Yale.

"Light Years" is about a marriage, its surface—an enviable round of dinner parties and indulgent Christmas projects (the daughters of the house actually have a pony) in a picture-postcard setting within commuting distance of Manhattan—and its coming apart from underneath. James Salter is a pen name; the writer's name is James Horowitz. His other novels include "A Sport and a Pastime" and "All That Is." *The New Yorker* staff writer Nick Paumgarten had recently written a long piece about him, and there was so much buzz about it in the office that I read it on my own time.

This was my first taste of James Salter himself, and his prose is exquisite, so well groomed that I was surprised to come to a sentence with what I considered a superfluous comma: "Eve was across the room in a thin, burgundy dress that showed the faint outline of her stomach." It stopped me. Usage guides say that if you can substitute "and" for the comma it belongs there. I gave James Salter the "and" test, and "thin and burgundy" did not pass. If this had crossed my desk, I would have taken the comma out and made it "a thin burgundy dress."

The logic behind this rule is that the two adjectives are not coördinate: they do not belong to the same order. One adjective ("burgundy") clings more tenaciously to the noun ("dress") than the other ("thin"). Bryan Garner, the expert in American usage, offers another test: reverse the order of the adjectives. Would you ever say "a burgundy, thin dress"? I wouldn't.

I wondered whether this was the author's comma or whether it had slipped past the copy editor. I doubted that it was something a copy editor would add. This edition of "Light Years" was typographically flawless. Was it possible that the comma was retained at the author's insistence? Consider the context: "Eve was across the room in a thin, burgundy dress that showed the faint outline of her stomach." Was the author trying to emphasize the thinness of the fabric in order to linger over the "faint outline" of her stomach? If so, I thought he was misguided, not to say lecherous. (Her name is Eve: she's obviously a temptress.) But was I going to let a superfluous comma prevent me from enjoying a good read? It didn't stop me in Dickens, and it wouldn't stop me in Salter. I persisted.

I was not completely impartial. "Light Years" had an introduction by Richard Ford, whose work I once tried to take a comma out of. The offending comma followed the word "So" at the beginning of a line of dialogue, and Ford preferred to retain it. The choice of Richard Ford

for the introduction suggested to me that James Salter, like Richard Ford, might be stubborn about his punctuation. He might be one of the "ear" guys, the ones who think they have to orchestrate each sentence.

Then it happened again: "She smiled that stunning, wide smile." The phrase "stunning and wide" doesn't make it for me, and neither does "wide and stunning" (although I would have read right over "wide, stunning smile"). The narrator has already remarked on the wideness of the character's smile (hence the "that" in "that stunning, wide smile") and is intensifying its attractiveness at the second reference. "Stunning" qualifies the wide smile. Adjectives not coördinate. No comma.

Again: "It was as if they were aboard ship: some old, island steamer." An "island steamer" is a kind of boat. There is no danger of someone's misreading the phrase as a steamer from "some old island."

And another nautical reference: "The ship was enormous . . . the vastness of its black, stained side overwhelmed them." This comma seems to be trying to repel a hyphen hovering between "black" and "stained." It is not a "black-stained side" but a black side, stained: a black stained side.

It's not that these four extraneous (to my ear) commas diminished my enjoyment of the book, but I did stop and wonder where they came from, the author or the editor, and whether there was any discussion about them. James Salter clearly has a sharp ear and a fine eye. His pen name evokes the word "psalter" while suggesting earthiness. In doing without a hyphen in the title "Light Years" (Webster's spells it "light-year"), he cubes the meaning: carefree years, seen from an astronomical distance. Just for balance, here is one of his finest commas: "He sailed on the *France* in the noisy, sad afternoon." Sad

and noisy, noisy and sad. "Noisy" is especially effective because it evokes "nausea," from the Greek for "seasickness." Could a writer so sensitive to language have a thing for kinky punctuation?

It was enough to make me doubt my comma sense. Some days, "thin and burgundy" sounded just fine. At work, coming to the phrase "a stout, middle-aged woman," I automatically started to pluck the comma out and then became unsure. "Stout and middle-aged"? I don't think so. "Middle-aged and stout"? Definitely not. Wasn't it the same as "a fat old lady"? "Fat and old"? "Old and fat"? An old fat lady? "An old fat lady" suggests that the fat lady in the circus is being hounded out of her job by an ambitious new fat lady, at which point she will become just another fat old lady. I was driving myself mad.

I decided to write to James Salter and ask him about his commas. He wrote back:

"I sometimes ignore the rules about commas although generally I follow convention and adhere to the advice in Strunk and White. Punctuation is for clarity and also emphasis, but I also feel that, if the writing warrants it, punctuation can contribute to the music and rhythm of the sentences. You don't get permission for this, of course; you take the liberty."

When a writer who is not a poet invokes rhythm, copy editors often exchange looks. But Salter went on to describe the reasoning behind each of the commas in question. As I had suspected, with the comma in "Eve was across the room in a thin, burgundy dress that showed the faint outline of her stomach," he was trying to emphasize the contours of the stomach under the dress. "It wasn't a thin burgundy dress," he wrote. "It was a thin dress, burgundy in color. I wanted the reader to be aware of the thinness. So you are right. The copy editor probably marked out the comma, and I wrote stet." He was doing the same thing with "stunning, wide smile," trying to control the impact of the "stunning" by smacking it with a comma as one would put

English on a cue ball. Of my next example, he wrote, "I suppose that there's no chance of a reader thinking it's an old island, but I felt an instant of hesitation about old and island as I read the words and wanted to eliminate that." For this reader, the comma added rather than eliminated the hesitation. As for the last, he wrote, "I think black stained side is too loose. It's not, as you say, black-stained, but black and also stained. The comma fixes that." Though Manuzio invented the comma in order to separate parts of a sentence, it can tie words together as efficiently as it keeps them apart.

Some would scoff at these explanations, but I am grateful for them, even if Salter does have some untoward ideas about what you can do with commas and imputes to them a power that verges on magic. The writer is not always the best judge of his own effects, but at least he's thinking about them. The comma does not fix everything. Sometimes it gets in the way. Salter ended his letter with a recommendation for further reading: "The commas are better in 'A Sport and a Pastime.'"

While in graduate school in Vermont, I decided I should learn how cars worked. I wanted to be self-reliant. I drove a '65 Plymouth Fury II, in dark blue-green. It had a huge expanse of windshield, which was great for scenic drives and winter sunsets, and a V-8 engine, which meant nothing to me. I knew how to pump gas and check the oil and change a flat tire, but that was about it. My father, a fireman, had discouraged me from learning anything about the workings of the internal-combustion engine. When I said I wanted to learn how cars worked, he said, "It's easy. I'll tell you everything you need to know. You put the key in the ignition and you turn it."

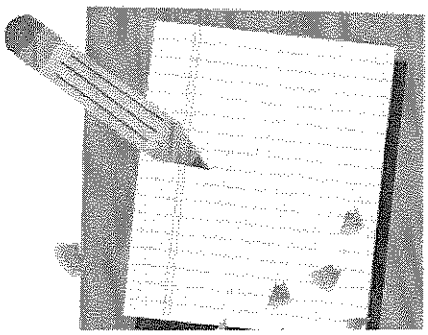
Thanks, Dad. To his credit, he had also advised me to cultivate a mechanic at a local gas station. But out in the Vermont countryside there were no gas stations—just a pump at Marble's Store, where you could leave the keys in the car and Marble would move it if it was in

the way. So I registered for an adult-education class in auto mechanics one night a week at the local high school. On the first night, the auto-mechanics teacher used a word I had never understood the meaning of: "gasket." I had blown one once, on a friend's car, driving too fast on hair-raising canyon roads in Utah, and I knew that it cost a lot to replace, and the car was never the same. (Sorry!) Now, at last, I was going to find out what a gasket was. So I raised my hand and asked, "What's a gasket?" The teacher, who looked like a used-car salesman, defined "gasket" by using three other words that I didn't know the meaning of: "crankcase," "pistons," "carburetor." I'm still not sure what a gasket is.

Grammar also has some intimidating terms, and grammarians throw them around constantly, but you don't need to know them in order to use the language. E. B. White once said that before working on "The Elements of Style" he was the kind of writer who did not have "any exact notion of what is taking place under the hood." You notice a gasket only when someone blows it. To understand how the language works, though—to master the mechanics of it—you have to roll up your sleeves and join the ink-stained wretches as we name the parts. But if that doesn't work for you, just put the key in the ignition and turn it. ♦

Mary Norris began working at *The New Yorker* in 1978, and has been a query proofreader at the magazine since 1993. Her book, "Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen," will be published in the spring.

RELATED STORIES



CULTURE DESK

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT PENCIL POINT

BY MARY NORRIS

PAGE-TURNER

DON'T HONE IN ON A COPY EDITOR

BY MARY NORRIS