

SECTION 3

PUNCTUATION OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES, CORRECT USAGE

PUNCTUATION

Current usage in punctuation varies and is determined by the need for clearness, by the effect the writer wishes to produce, and by the balance or rhythm in the sentence. There can not always be fixed rules for these things. One must try to develop a "punctuation sense." Often it helps, when one is in doubt about how to punctuate, to read the material aloud, in order to observe what punctuation is needed to make the thought clear.

For example, usage differs in regard to the comma before and in a series such as the following:

He was studying chemistry, English, geometry, and economics.

He was studying chemistry, English, geometry and economics.

But in such a sentence as the following, the comma before the last **and** is an aid to clearness and therefore should be used:

The school offered courses in cooking, designing and dressmaking, first aid and home nursing, and home management.

How many courses are mentioned?

There is a decided tendency toward using fewer marks of punctuation, so that the sentence is allowed to flow in longer units without interruption. We may say, then, that clarity and simplicity are the goals to be achieved in all our punctuation. In many cases there is a preference for one usage rather than another; and in this guide book you will be offered what is apparently the preferred modern usage in punctuation. This is sometimes hard to determine, as you can readily see. These facts make the matter of punctuation somewhat more puzzling but very much more interesting.

Watch the punctuation in good current magazines and books for a few paragraphs—or even several pages—and see what you discover.

PUNCTUATION OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

1. A long prepositional phrase at the first of the sentence, or a group of related phrases, is usually followed by a comma.

During the extremely long and tiring intermission, the crowd became restless.

After four days of exhausting labor in the midst of a blizzard, the rescue party reached the survivors of the crash.

2. A phrase which is merely introductory is followed by a comma.

In fact, the farther I pursued the matter the more mystified I became.

On the other hand, a person may feel fully refreshed after apparently restless sleep.

3. When **with** or **without** begins the phrase, it is often quite loosely connected and is set off by commas.

Complete relaxation in sleep, with the body limp all over as in a swoon, is extremely rare.

Suddenly, without warning and for no reason, I knew I was frightened and near panic.

4. Prepositional phrases arranged with three or more in a series are separated by commas. (In order to form a series they must all modify the same word. This sentence does not contain a series: In the midst of an orchard on the side of a gently sloping hill in Vermont, stood the dignified old farmhouse.)

Over the footstool, around the armchair, and under the table scampered the kitten.

In my feverish dream I seemed to be surrounded by feathers; they were to the right, to the left, above me, below me, around me, even in my ears.