The Oxford comma (also known as the serial comma or the Harvard comma) refers to the rule of putting a comma after each item in a list of three or more, including before the last item preceding the conjunctions and or or. Examples: “I bought pens, pencils, a planner, postcards, and popcorn.” “She couldn’t decide whether to take her vacation in Peru, Poland, or Panama.”

Since many styles list it as optional, and because U.S. newspapers have historically disregarded the rule (per Associated Press style), apparently to save space, it is common for many people to omit the comma before the second-to-last item in a list (“I bought pens, pencils, a planner, postcards and popcorn.”) Both American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA) style support the Oxford comma rule.

Simon and Schuster’s Handbook for Writers (7th ed.) warns “Never use a comma before the first, or after the last, item in a series, unless another rule makes it necessary.

No The gym was decorated with, red, white, and blue ribbons.
No The gym was decorated with red, white, and blue, ribbons.
No The gym was decorated with red, white and blue, ribbons.
Yes The gym was decorated with red, white, and blue ribbons.” (Troyka, 2005, p. 416)

Using the Oxford comma often helps to avoid confusion. For example:

- If a menu lists the sandwiches of the day as “tuna, roast beef, ham and cheese,” one would not know if four sandwiches or three were offered. Ham and cheese might be one selection, or the intention is to offer a ham sandwich and a cheese sandwich.
- If Uncle Sterling’s inheritance were to be divided equally between his nieces Charlene, Abagail and Stella, one might argue that Charlene gets one half and Abagail and Stella (as a set) get the other half. The Oxford comma would assure that each niece received one-third of the total sum (the inclusion of the comma helped avoid family discord!).
- In the acknowledgement “I’d like to thank my parents, Jesus and Eleanor Roosevelt,” it sounds as if Jesus and Mrs. Roosevelt were the parents and that Jesus’s last name was Roosevelt.
- If class options are listed as “art history, abnormal psychology and communication and writing,” one may not be sure if one class is abnormal psychology and communication or one class is abnormal psychology and another class is communication and writing. It could also be that there are four class offerings: communication, writing, abnormal psychology, and art history.

Using the Oxford comma usually adds clarity. In situations where ambiguity remains even with the inclusion of the Oxford comma, it may be best to rephrase the sentence. For example, “The instructors for the class were my mother, a knitting expert, and the owner of the Yarn Owl” could be rewritten: “The two instructors for the class were my mother, who is a knitting expert, and the owner of the Yarn Owl” or “The three instructors were a knitting expert, the owner of the Yarn Owl, and my mother.”
Test your knowledge – Add commas where you think they belong

1. When *Harry Potter* premiered, I brought my wand, scarf, glasses, and potions list to the film.
2. Any dentist will tell you that the essentials for healthy teeth include brushing, flossing, and drinking less soda.
3. My favorite ice-cream flavors are coffee, mocha chip, strawberry, and mint chip.
4. The backyard was decorated with black, green, and red balloons; streamers with green and black polka dots; and tablecloths with red, green, and black stripes. (Semicolons are used to separate items in lists when one or more items require commas.)
5. My favorite foods include bananas and peanut butter, jelly beans, bacon and eggs, and toast. (This should be rephrased because there are several options. Bananas and peanut butter could be a set; peanut butter and jelly could be a set; jelly beans could be an item; beans, bacon, and eggs could be a set; bacon could be an item; or eggs and toast could be a set.)
6. All Fritz had in the cupboard were boxes of cookies, macaroni, and cheese and crackers.
7. After winning first place in the art show, Theodora told the audience her major influences were her artist uncles, Frieda Kahlo and Georgia O’Keefe.

**Answers**

1. When *Harry Potter* premiered, I brought my wand, scarf, glasses, and potions list to the film.
2. Any dentist will tell you that the essentials for healthy teeth include brushing, flossing, and drinking less soda.
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6. All Fritz had in the cupboard were boxes of cookies, macaroni, and cheese and crackers. OR All Fritz had in the cupboard were boxes of cookies, macaroni, and cheese and crackers.
7. After winning first place in the art show, Theodora told the audience her major influences were her artist uncles, Frieda Kahlo, and Georgia O’Keefe.

**A note about the controversy of using or not using the Oxford comma**

It is not grammatically correct or incorrect to use the Oxford (serial) comma, but rather a *style suggestion* to help keep things consistent. For example, some styles write website, some Web site, some Website; none of those ways are more correct than the other, but writers can look up comma use in manual for the style they are writing in to avoid inconsistency. Some styles that support the Oxford comma rule include APA, MLA, Chicago, and the U.S. Government Printing Office. Check your style manual to see if the Oxford comma is required, recommended, or omitted.

This handout was last updated September 11, 2012.