

FROM THE LEGAL WRITING CLINIC
WRITING TIP OF THE WEEK

USE THE SERIAL COMMA



The “serial comma” is the final comma before the conjunction joining a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses. Although the serial comma is optional in many other types of writing, you should use it in legal and business writing because it is more precise.

- The plaintiff must establish duty, breach, causation, and damages.
- After the transfer, Mr. Jones could no longer ride the bus, carpool with his coworkers, or take the light rail to work.

Omitting the serial comma can make the last two items in the series look like a single unit, which can create ambiguities.

- The company’s website includes instructional manuals, links to other sites and items for sale. (Are the items for sale available on the company’s website or linked on the “other sites”?)
- The company’s website includes instructional manuals, links to other sites, and items for sale. (The items for sale are on the company’s website.)

A series requires three or more words, phrases, or clauses. Two items are not a series and do not ordinarily require a comma before the conjunction.

- The physician followed the community standard of care and the hospital’s policies. (no comma necessary before the conjunction)

However, under a different comma rule, insert a comma before the conjunction when using a conjunction to join two main clauses (each of which could stand alone as a complete sentence).

- The physician followed the community standard of care, and he also complied with all hospital policies.

Anne Enquist and Laurel Currie Oates, Just Writing 228-29, 259-60 (4th ed. 2013); Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, The Legal Writing Handbook 662-64 (5th ed. 2010); Lawmanac—Clickable Help for Legal Writers, “Punctuation, Capitalization & Typeface” (follow “Comma” hyperlink; then follow ”Joining-Serial Comma Rule” hyperlink) (C. Edward Good ed., 2009).