

Comma Karma Redux

To the Editor:

William Marvel's column on "Comma Karma" (September 18th) trots out a tired debate about the serial comma, and he gets his facts wrong when he criticizes Associated Press style in general. AP does *not* call for describing five-and-a-half-years-old Tommy as "51/2." In fact, AP (according to the 2015 stylebook, as well as preceding years' editions) would read: "5 1/2" ... with a space between the whole number and the fraction.

And while Mr. Marvel feels that "in an inflexible AP world, consistency often trumps clarity,"

punctuation perils.

Regardless of linguistic leanings, I'll heed the advice of Lynne Truss, who wrote, in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*: "There are people who embrace the Oxford comma, and people who don't, and I'll just say this: never get between these people when drink has been taken."

William Hall
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The New Hampshire Gazette

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he probably should take another look at the stylebook. AP has repeatedly explained that the serial comma should be used where its omission would create confusion (e.g., in a series of complex phrases).

Moreover, the example he cites of Chicago style's clarity ("Bruno lives with Terry, his wife, and sister.") is also ambiguous. Is Terry's wife a resident of the domicile, or is Terry actually Bruno's wife? Both interpretations are grammatically valid. (Although the

understood "his" before "sister" would be lost in one of the readings, the ambiguity remains if one includes "his.")

Like Mr. Marvel, I generally prefer Chicago and its use of the serial comma in my personal writing. But after years as a reporter and editor, I also appreciate the economy of AP style, where every character of type is at a premium. Yes, AP can be confusing, but so can the alternative. Better to rework the sentence and avoid the paired

William:

We solicited a response from Mr. Marvel. Here it is:

"The virtues Mr. Hall claims for the AP Stylebook are either alien to the AP-obsessed managing editor at the Conway Daily Sun or are absent from my 2002 edition of the AP Stylebook, and may reflect belated recognition of flaws such as those I mentioned. Personally, I find AP style obnoxious enough

that I would not consider paying good money for a more recent version. The aforementioned managing editor and I may encounter each other after the consumption of alcohol sometime in early December, if she holds her current position, and Mr. Hall is welcome to referee if he dares."

The Editor



PORTSMOUTH HERALD



Sept. 6 -- To the Editor:

I have heard many accounts of how disruptive Seacoast's helicopters are, and the complaints seem to be coming from far more than "a few people." But aside from that, the Portsmouth Herald's so-called news story ("Seacoast Helicopters soars to new heights") is simply bad journalism, and as a result presents a distorted view of the issue.

The article makes three references to the concerns of residents, but the reporter apparently never bothered to try talking with any of them. The CEO, an employee, and a business cheerleader are all quoted, but not a single word from a member of the public? This isn't balanced reporting -- it's PR hucksterism. The reporter, the editor, and Gatehouse Media should be ashamed.

Even the language is colored and inappropriate. Sorry, Jeff, but the City Council did NOT "realize" Seacoast was an allowed use at Pease. The council "decided," "ruled," etc. "Realized" implies that the allowed usage was an accepted, pre-existing fact, which it most certainly was not. At the very least, this wording should be corrected in the online version of the story.

And please, please do not run glorified press releases like this in the future.

William Hall

Yarmouth, Maine

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