

## **COMMAKAZE: THE DIVINE MARK**

We know the extremes: the punctuation addicts whose prose seems--like Victorian architecture or modern-day calligraphy--too fancy for its function, more arty than artful. Its appearance: wallpaper, squirming with ink. These writers move us gently, yet always deliberately, from part to part, seemingly all the while perhaps a bit...distraught.

And then there are the notorious under-punctuators like Bertrude Stein or William Faulkner whose prose often must be read all in one breath because there simply are no parks to help the reader who must dig deeper and deeper not even knowing where they're going and maybe not even caring as they construct in their own minds what it all really means.

Those of us who ride comfortably in the middle, carefully observing when punctuation fad has become punctuation rule, we know where home is: the comma. Not the breathless dash, not the colon with its wall of periods holding back a flood of words, not the semicolon lying like a dead fish between our words, its dark eyes unseeing. Just the comma, please. If those other three marks turned up missing one morning, we could still make do with the germinal, sperminal comma and the eight basic rules for its use.

The following sentences each need a single comma. As you decide where the comma goes in each, try to recall which of the eight rules justifies its use. The rules are given with the answers after the sentences.

1. By late afternoon there was a shy breeze that moved through the willows drooping branches like a stranger's hand across a beaded curtain.
2. Loomed in the same style and texture as 100 years ago these woven clothes recall a time of solidity and care now faded as a pair of designer jeans.
3. Since man as well as woman often link their self-esteem with what they wear it is not surprising that compulsive shoppers come in both sexes.
4. Vegetarians have lower blood pressure than nonvegetarians and it is postulated that the higher fiber content of vegetarian diets contributes materially to the difference.
5. The incriminating evidence was provided not by a jealous coworker or vindictive boss or the spurned lover or any of those who wanted Richard to die, but by Richard's own arrogant carelessness.
6. AT&T recently patented a new wide-band high-speed packet switch that can interweave voice, data, and video on a single channel.
7. She picked up her child and held him, face to face; it amazed Dianne that she, like the other women in her life, was a mother now too.
8. Another noticeable change in the tournament concerns the caliber of play which has improved every year and has achieved a greater level of consistency.

## ANSWERS TO "COMMAKAZE"

1. Comma follows "afternoon." "By late afternoon," an adverb phrase, functions here as a sentence modifier ("absolute" for you old-school types). Sentence modifiers should be set off with commas, although some writers prefer to speed up their prose by not having the comma after short prepositional phrases of time and place (such as "By late afternoon!")
2. Comma after "ago." Introductory participial phrases, present or past tense variety, are set off with commas. Period.
3. Comma after "wear." Opening dependent clauses must be separated from their main clause with commas.
4. Comma after "nonvegetarians." Compound sentences, unless they're short and/or closely related, must separate their clause with a comma when followed by a coordinate conjunction. Changes in the group of coordinate conjunctions: "as" is mostly out of fashion, and "plus" is cropping up here and there, mostly there.
5. Comma after "provided." Interrupting negative alternatives are set off by commas. This sentence already contains the second comma in the pair, the one after "die."
6. Comma after "wide-band." Both "wide-band" and "high-speed" are coordinate modifiers of the noun. Coordinate modifiers and coordinate items in a list always take commas unless joined by "and." The other two adjectives "new" and "packet," also modify the noun but each in a different way than the coordinate adjectives. It's interesting that native speakers can determine from the structure and rhythm of the sentence that "packet switch" is a two-noun (like nuclear reactor) without ever having heard the term "packet switch" before. Omitting the comma after "data" is a widespread practice now. But Purists insist (mostly to themselves) that the comma should be included unless the last two items are a single unit. Probate judges can be purists. One judge interpreted a will that read, "and I leave \$10,000 to be apportioned to children John, Mary and Robert" to mean that John should receive \$5,000 and Mary and Robert had to split the other \$5,000. True story.
7. Comma after "now." When "too" is used as a synonym for "also" it receives a comma.
8. Comma after "play." What follows "play" is a nonrestrictive clause, which always takes a comma (as do other parenthetical elements if they are not trapped inside parentheses).

### Score

8:	excellent	5-4:	average
6-7:	good	0-3:	instructional handouts available in the Writing Lab

### A Parting Shot

After listing some rules for writing in his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell advises readers to "Break any of these rules before writing something abominable." That's good advice for any writer."