

The Oxford Comma

The United Kingdom officially left the European Union on January the 31st, three-and-a-half years after the British people voted to leave. The U.K. government issued a special coin to mark the occasion. However, the coin is at the centre of an argument about punctuation. The new 50-pence coin became available yesterday. It has the words: "Peace, prosperity and friendship with all nations" on its reverse side. A famous British writer, Sir Philip Pullman, is unhappy with the punctuation. He believes the phrase is incorrectly punctuated. Mr Pullman said there should be a comma after the word "prosperity". Such a comma is called an Oxford comma. He said the coin, "should be boycotted by all literate people".

The Oxford comma gets its name from the Oxford University Press, which makes common use of the punctuation mark. In the USA, it is called the serial comma. It is used before the final "and" or "or" in a written list of three or more items. Many people say there is no need for an Oxford comma in the phrase on the 50-pence coin because the meaning is very clear. Word expert Susie Dent said the Oxford comma is useful if it makes it easier to understand the writer's meaning. A U.K. citizen said the comma issue wasn't important. She tweeted: "It doesn't matter if there is a comma or not on the 50p coin. The most important thing is that there is peace, and prosperity, and friendship with all nations."

This is an example of how the Oxford (or serial) comma can change the meaning of a sentence.

In sentence one below, the writer talked to four people: her two sisters, plus a lady called Maya, and another lady called Hana.

In sentence two, the writer talked to two people: her two sisters, whose names are Maya and Hana.

1. She talked to her two sisters, Maya, and Hana.
2. She talked to her two sisters, Maya and Hana.

TRUE / FALSE: Guess if 1-8 below are true (T) or false (F).

1. The British people voted to leave the EU two years ago. T / F
2. The new coin has an argument in its centre. T / F
3. The front of the new coin has a message about peace on its front. T / F
4. A writer asked people who can read to boycott the coin. T / F
5. The Oxford comma was named because of the Oxford University Press. T / F
6. The Oxford comma is used with a written list of two or more items. T / F
7. The article said the meaning of the phrase on the coin is unclear. T / F
8. A woman tweeted that the comma did not matter. T / F