

AND: with a comma before it or not?

This is a question which native speakers disagree about, sometimes passionately.

Introduction

Before I give my opinion on this, let me say two things: first, grammar rules come after the language, and describe it. Grammar rules (I don't even like the word 'rules') are an attempt to say how the language works. They are descriptive, not prescriptive. They don't tell you what to say, they say what it is that people say. Native speakers know how to use the language. Each native speaker is unique; we all have our own way of speaking and writing. If you are not a native speaker, it's different: you need guidance, and indeed rules, to help you understand how the language works.

Second, punctuation is there to help you understand the text, and to avoid ambiguities. Think of the punctuation as being like road signs, helping you to find your way. Where is this road leading? Or, if you like, where is this sentence leading?

So, you're reading a text and you see a comma. What does that tell you? Well, it means a slight pause, but the same idea continues; it's not like a full stop (period), which brings the idea to an end. There are different kinds of slight pauses; here are the ones where *and* is involved (or not involved).

1 In a list

We bought some bananas, some oranges, a peach and an apple.

Put commas between items in a list, until you get to the last item, where we commonly use *and* without a comma.

The so-called 'Oxford comma', or 'serial comma', is the one sometimes used after the penultimate item in a list, and before *and*, like this:

We bought some bananas, some oranges, a peach, and an apple.

I don't use it, but it's not wrong to use it or not use it; it's a matter of stylistic preference. I think it's a bit old-fashioned myself, but that's my view.

2 Joining two clauses (or sentences, if you prefer)

There is a continuum, which goes from this:

She bought a new dress and went to the party.

Both verbs, *bought* and *went*, have the same subject (*She*), and the idea flows very easily from one half to the next. No pause, no comma.

...through this:

She bought a new dress(,) and Susan went with her to help.

It's a different subject, but the ideas flow together nicely, so the comma is – in my view – optional. Some people take the view that, with a new subject, you really need the comma. Maybe.

....and this:

She bought a new dress, and then she couldn't decide whether to wear it.

Here, the *and* is closer to *but*, so the two sentences don't flow easily from one to the other, and you feel the need for a comma. Look at my last sentence:

The two sentences don't flow easily from one to the other, and you feel the need for a comma.

Again, I felt the need for a comma because there's a new subject, *you*, and the ideas are connected but different.

Conclusion

I think that's all pretty clear, and means that you decide whether to use a comma or not according to how much the meaning stays on course, changes course a little, or a lot. If it changes course a lot you will probably need something stronger than a comma anyway.

How did this problem arise? Back in Shakespeare's time there wasn't an issue, and people put all kinds of punctuation before (and even after) commas. Just look at the King James Bible: in the first ten verses of Genesis there are 27 uses of *and*. 24 of them have punctuation before them, that is to say, *nearly all of them*. They are mostly full stops (12), but also commas (5). The others have colons (4) or semi-colons (3) before them.

But in Victorian England everything changed. There was a new middle class, making pots of money in the industrial revolution. They had acquired wealth, and now needed to acquire polish, which meant using the language the way 'educated' people used it. Latin was the prestige language at the time, and lo and behold publishers rushed to produce books, based on Latin grammar, on how to write good English. But English is not a Latin language, and the rules they wrote, which they set up as prescriptive (see above), were often simply wrong. One of them was:

"Do not use a comma before *and*" (after all, the Romans didn't)

This rule is not true, or at best half true. No, not even half true; it's a quarter true. The Victorians often wrote beautiful English (Dickens, George Eliot, the Bronte sisters...), but their grammarians were mostly deeply unhelpful, and did more harm than good. Dickens, by the way, uses commas before *and* **many times**.