

# A 10-Point Comma Quiz

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Here's a quiz: Do the following sentences require an additional comma (or perhaps two), the omission of an existing one (or two), or both? Answers and explanations follow.

- 1.** The word *breakfast* literally means to break the fasting period of your night's sleep, so you can refuel for the day.
- 2.** The first scene takes place in a dimly lit, tactical command center on an aircraft carrier.
- 3.** The finishing stage is a series of asphalt "ski jumps," only the "skiers" are skiing the wrong way.
- 4.** One of their biggest challenges was coming up with a story that would resonate on a deep, emotional level.
- 5.** Another English writer named Richard Browne used scientific reasoning to confirm the theory.
- 6.** Among slaves, other popular instruments included drums made from hollowed logs covered with animal hides or kitchen pots and pans.
- 7.** They continued to run the establishment, and took great pride in the accomplishments of their sons who kept in regular contact.
- 8.** The storm inspired the title of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- 9.** As slaves were moved around, they encountered other tribes and dance forms such as the Calenda gained widespread intertribal appeal.
- 10.** "Newspapers and polling organizations predicted that Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, would be America's next president."

## Answers and Explanations

- 1.** Delete. Inclusion of the comma in this sentence incorrectly implies that thanks to the meaning of the word *breakfast*, you can refuel for the day.
- 2.** Delete. The reference is not to a command center that is dimly lit and tactical; it's to a tactical command center that is dimly lit. (Don't let technical jargon deter you from making sense of a compound noun.)
- 3.** Both. *Only* here is not a qualifier that suggests "the 'skiers' and nobody else"; it's a synonym for *however*, so punctuate as you would were that word used instead. Also, the first comma should be not just deleted but

also replaced by an em dash that sets off the unusual circumstance described in the final phrase. (References to skiing are enclosed in scare quotes because the participants are not actually skiers but are engaging in an analogous activity.)

**4. Delete.** As with sentence #2, the appositive structure is confused. The reference is to an emotional level that is deep, not a level that is deep and emotional, *so deep* and *emotional* are noncoordinate adjectives and therefore require no intervening comma.

**5. Add.** Unless a previous sentence referenced a different English writer by that name, the phrase “named Richard Browne” should be set off by two commas to demonstrate that it’s an appositive to “another English writer” and is therefore parenthetical. (In other words, it’s nonessential; the sentence would make sense without it.)

**6. Add.** The drums were not made from logs covered with hides or with kitchenware; they could be hide-covered logs, or they could be pots and pans. That fact needs to be clarified with a comma following *hides*, plus a second *from*, inserted before *kitchen* to complete the parallel structure.

**7. Both.** The comma is neither necessary nor incorrect, but if it’s retained, a second *they*, after *and*, would smooth the sentence somewhat. But the definite error is this: Unless there are two groups of progeny — sons who kept in regular contact, and sons who didn’t, an appositive comma must be added after *sons*.

**8. Delete.** A quick online search will inform you that Hurston wrote more than one novel, so the nonrestrictive comma, which incorrectly implies that she published just one novel, should be jettisoned.

**9. Add.** The lack of a comma after *tribes* suggests that the slaves encountered other tribes and other dance forms, but then another verb crops up after that and creates a cognitive logjam. What the sentence means is that slaves’ encounters with slaves from other tribes led to increased exposure to new dance forms. The inserted comma will clarify that a new clause begins with *and*.

**10. Delete.** This error of apposition is one of the most annoying, relentlessly viral mistakes in English today. (Think of it this way: A comma implies a pause. Does the reader pause at all, much less twice, during this sentence?) Evidently, the misunderstanding stems from a confusion with the appositive structure of the phrase form exemplified in “Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate.”

The sentence would be correct if *the* were inserted before the epithet “Republican candidate,” but it is alternatively rendered proper by the omission of the two commas. The appropriate correction depends on the context (that is, whether a previous reference to a Republican candidate has been made).