

The Humble Comma

We need to get more out of the comma. It can be

OpeningCommaPhrase

ClosingCommaPhrase

The parcel, expected since yesterday, arrived today.

The parcel, John thought, would arrive today.

Must end in second comma or ClauseInitiator/Terminator.

If a comma follows the first noun phrase, or precedes a verb phrase, look for matching comma. May be several alternatives. A closing comma can close several opening commas.

InitiatingCommaPhrase

TerminatingCommaPhrase

Can start or terminate subordinate clause, prepositional chain, or terminating noun phrase.

After the party, they all went home.

As it was still early, they drove to Richmond.

They drove to Richmond, as it was still early.

They drove to Cairo, the city on the Nile.

GroupingCoordinatePhrase

The object to the right of the comma is Anded with an object to its left, but not the one immediately adjacent (it may be Anded or Ored, depending on the actual coordinate conjunction to its right).

The car in the driveway, the boat on the river and the plane.

Can be Local...

Need to use semantics to show “boat” is more like “car” than “driveway”, and “car” is unlikely to be in “the driveway, the boat and the plane” – at least not all at once.

LocalCoordinatePhrase

The object to the left of the comma is Anded with the object to its right.

The car, the boat and the plane.

Can't be OpeningCommaPhrase or ClosingCommaPhrase (no second comma). Can't be Grouping...

The car, the boat, the plane, the motorcycle, the house and the chalet.

The commas either side of “the plane” must be LocalCoordinatePhrase. This gives us

The car, (the boat and the plane and the motorcycle), the house and the chalet.

The car, the boat, the plane and its pilot, the motorcycle, the house and the chalet.

The preposition allows Grouping as a possibility.

InternalCoordinatePhrase

The large, ugly car.

He was running quickly, freely and powerfully.

This only works for adjectives and adverbs followed by an appropriate object –

He was running quickly, freely mixing several styles as he did so.