

**Teaching Young Writers to Use Punctuation with  
Precision and Purpose**

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## Ways to Make Young Writers Aware of Punctuation

Teachers often lament that many children do not remember to “put in” the punctuation when they write. Sometimes we see punctuation accuracy as the difference between “good” writing and, well, “bad” writing. And, as teachers, we wrestle with ways to improve precision in punctuation use. We know the importance of using written conventions accurately, but our students often don’t understand our concern.

Perhaps we need to change the way we teach punctuation by leaning toward inquiry and conveying meaning. For example, we might show children *how* punctuation works, rather than giving them punctuation rules. We might teach children to value punctuation marks as much as letters and words for conveying meaning. We might invite children to see that punctuation is not something writers *add on* to writing, but is something writers use to help them compose and to help their readers understand what they want to say.

Here are some ways teachers might help their students become aware of punctuation that is precise and powerful:

- From the beginning of the year, be sure to read aloud to students with attention to punctuation. Occasionally take time to point out interesting punctuation in a read aloud text. Let it become part of the conversation in your room about books, reading, and writing.
- Plan a unit of study on written conventions. This is a chunk of time when you will be focusing on conventions in reading and writing. Your purpose is to teach children that readers read the punctuation to make meaning, so writers write with punctuation to convey meaning.
- Give children opportunities to notice punctuation as they read and to rehearse and discuss what the punctuation does to a reader’s voice.
- Ask children to go on an inquiry into punctuation. What do they discover about how writers use commas? What do dashes mean and what do readers do with their voices when they see them? How is meaning shaped by the punctuation a writer chooses to use?
- Allow children to “try out” punctuation in their notebooks, the way young musicians practice on their instruments. This is a place for rehearsal and discovery, and for working toward achieving a voice. How can they try to make their writing sound like the sentences and phrases they’ve studied? How can they use punctuation to make their writing clearer?
- Open up the full range of punctuation for children, including dashes, ellipsis, and semi-colons. Let them experiment. Let them enjoy writing interesting and complex sentences.
- Allow children to play with interesting punctuation as much as you would want them to play with interesting words.
- Teach students to study authors as one way to learn about punctuation.
- Teach editor’s marks and let students use them to refine punctuation in their drafts. Teach them to ask themselves, “Is this how I want it to sound? What am I trying to say here?”

## **Teaching Punctuation to Upper Grade Students Balancing Inquiry and Instruction Or**

### **We know they've been taught this, so why aren't they using it?**

One of the first things we must teach young writers is the purpose and function of punctuation. Many students think punctuation is something writers sprinkle on after writing the words, and often they misunderstand when they are told to “go back and fix the punctuation.” Therefore, in order to change their perception, we must teach them that *punctuation is a unit of composition*. We can teach this to students through a combination of inquiry and direct instruction, understanding that it will take time for students to master punctuation. Learning punctuation is a process, like any sophisticated skill.

- Using grade appropriate literature, lead students in an inquiry into what messages writers give readers when they use punctuation
- Focus on how particular punctuation marks help readers access meaning, i.e., that each mark is a symbol for something. At this point, do not focus on the rules *yet*.
- Allow students to use their own words to create a chart of punctuation meanings with exact examples from literature to support their thinking
- Give students time to practice punctuation in their notebooks, both in entries they've already written and as they compose new entries.
- Ask students to talk (or write) about specific punctuation decisions they've made in their writing. Ask what they were trying to communicate to their readers by using that punctuation. They might refer back to ways a particular author used the same punctuation marks.
- Add student writing samples to the chart and offer opportunity for conversation about them
- Ask students to look in other texts to find more uses for each mark, as well as other examples of the same uses
- Discuss how some authors seem to use punctuation more formally than others. Use literature examples to illustrate this. Discuss what this might mean for their work.
- Explore the idea of using a mentor author in order to learn punctuation and ways to choose that author wisely

- Discuss the possible punctuation differences in genre, e.g. e-mail is less formal than a science report. Look at literature examples across genres in order to illustrate this. Talk about what that means for their own work in school.
- Give students opportunities to write “dictation” for a partner and to exchange
- Give them a dictation sample and collect it to quickly assess which students need extra support
- Consider organizing small guided writing groups for students who are having trouble or for those who are ready for more sophisticated work
- In reading conferences, ask students to talk about ways they’ve used punctuation to access meaning
- In writing conferences, ask students to talk about punctuation decisions they’ve made
- Choose selected sentences from texts as ways to teach students to write longer sentences
- Discuss the idea of “automaticity.” Sometimes writers think about each comma, but most times it’s appropriate to be able to compose quickly. Writers shouldn’t have to think about the period at the end of each sentence, any more than musicians think about each rest.
- Finally, bring out the style manuals or textbooks and ask students to find each “rule” in the books. Add the formal rules to the chart beside the student language. Give them time to process this and to talk about the formal language of the rules.
- Create a rubric with students that will offer opportunities for them to explain some of the punctuation choices they’ve made

## **A Unit of Study in Punctuation To be taught in November in the Reading and Writing Workshops**

Preparation to be done before unit of study:

- Several weeks before you plan to begin the study, start to think aloud about and remark on the punctuation in read alouds, shared reading, and interactive writing. Rehearse the reading of a period, comma and so on, aloud, saying, “Hmm, I wonder how that should sound.” Do this in a casual manner, as if to tuck information into your mini-lessons, but not as the primary focus of your mini-lessons *yet*. Use your hand, finger, or a pointer to sweep shared or guided reading selections, pausing carefully and appropriately at the punctuation. This is to introduce the students to the concept that there is more to the reading of a page than decoding the words.
- Borrow several Big Books from primary classrooms. Be sure to have enough so there is a book for every two or three students to study. Choose books that have varied punctuation in them so students can notice more than periods.
- Assess your students to determine what they know about written conventions and to plan exactly what you will teach. Do you need to begin from the absolute beginning, or can you jump forward a little? Do you need to reserve some time for children who need extra instruction in small guided writing groups?
- Be sure your students are reading independently at their appropriate levels, and that they are in same level partnerships for talking about books.
- Choose books to read aloud that use a variety of interesting and vibrant punctuation. Read these books several times so the children become very familiar with the plots, patterns, and so on. These are books you will refer to during the study, but you will not necessarily want to take the time to read them aloud again in their entirety. In general, read aloud from a variety of genres, styles and lengths.
- Be sure to regularly write in front of the class, thinking aloud about the punctuation choices you make
- Look at your curriculum calendar and set aside at least two weeks during which you will devote your direct, whole class instruction to punctuation (or some other language convention, such as grammar).

**Day 1:** In your reading workshop, introduce punctuation by distributing Big Books to partnerships of two or three students and asking them to read the books focusing on the punctuation. Then make a chart of the marks they notice, the examples from the books, and the students’ thoughts on why and how the authors used each mark to convey meaning.

**Day 2:** Distribute Big Books again. Ask students to read aloud to each other and to notice what the punctuation makes them do with their voices as they read. They may need to rehearse this several times, saying, “How does this sound?” Students may go off into different parts of the room to practice reading with punctuation. At the end of the

class, the teacher adds another column to the chart: what students decided they did with their voices in response to each punctuation mark.

**Day 3:** (*optional lesson*) Today you'll want children to see that writers use punctuation in similar ways, that is, you will introduce the concept of constancy. Choose a page from a book that the students know well, such as a read aloud book or touchstone text from writing workshop. Put the page on an overhead transparency, and ask the students to notice what the writer did with the punctuation on this page. Let them talk in partnerships and refer back to the Big Book they studied and to the punctuation chart from the previous days. They should notice some standard ways to use punctuation marks, although they may use child-appropriate language to describe them. Then send the children off to read their independent reading books and to notice what the writers of their books did with punctuation. Ask them to jot down notes about punctuation from their reading in their reading notebooks or on stickies.

**Day 4:** Writers use punctuation to direct their readers to read the written words certain ways and to convey meaning to their readers. Begin a second chart ( or add a column to the first chart) to which students contribute samples of what the authors of their independent reading books did with punctuation. Then during independent reading time, ask children to find more examples of uses of punctuation from their books and to write these on index cards or stickies and add them to the chart. The focus must be that writers use punctuation to communicate meaning, not as something they add on as an afterthought. (An extension might be to look for examples in the real world, such as ads, and then add another column to the chart for real world examples students find.)

**Day 5:** The purpose of this lesson is to refine and deepen students' understanding of punctuation. Ask students to look over both charts and choose one punctuation mark they want to study in depth. Then form study groups on these punctuation marks; students choose which group they want to join. Students work together in their groups, looking at books to "research" ways writers have used each mark. They may look in books they have already read or in the class's read aloud books. Students prepare for the punctuation workshops they will give for each other on Day 6. (Extension: Students verify their findings in reference books. This lesson may take more than one day.)

**Day 6:** Today is the mid-point of the unit and a chance for a small celebration on what they have learned about punctuation in reading workshop. Therefore, the punctuation study groups will report on their findings in little seminars for each other. These reports should include *what* the punctuation mark was used for, as well as *examples* of each use from actual books. If there is time remaining, students should read independently, paying careful attention to how the punctuation helps the voices in their minds and possibly taking notes about punctuation to share at the end of the class.

**Day 7:** Today the punctuation focus flips from reading workshop to writing workshop. Just as writers use punctuation to convey meaning in books, students need to use punctuation to communicate to their readers. On the overhead projector, the teacher models rereading some of her or his writing to add or change some of the punctuation

based on what the class has learned about punctuation. The teacher may refer to the charts or to the books they have studied. Students reread their writing notebooks or drafts to find places where they can practice some of the punctuation they have studied. As they try out punctuation in their own writing, they write examples on stickies and add these to the charts in another column.

**Day 8:** Writers do not write without punctuation, only to add it all in later. Today, by thinking aloud, the teacher models on an overhead transparency how he or she *composes* a short piece of writing using punctuation to communicate meaning. Then students practice this by writing entries in their notebooks, paying careful attention to using punctuation to convey meaning.

**Day 9:** Writers often read their work aloud to work on the flow and rhythm of their sentences and paragraphs. Today the teacher models working with a partner (a student or another teacher) to demonstrate how he or she rehearses writing, including deciding which punctuation marks to use to help communicate meaning to the reader. Then students go off to work with their partners to think aloud about which punctuation marks to use in their writing.

**Day 10:** Just as musicians study notation and harmony, writers study punctuation (as well as grammar). The teacher shows that when he or she has a question about how or when to use punctuation, there are ways to get some answers: look at the writing of a writer you know and respect, look in a reference book in the classroom, or ask an expert. Children spend time looking through classroom resources and make lists in their writing notebooks about specific places they can go to find answers. They end by knowing they have strategies for finding answers to punctuation questions, and that as writers, they are responsible for using punctuation, as well as words, to communicate to their readers.

**Day 11:** Students celebrate by sharing some writing in which they deliberately have used punctuation to express meaning. They also reflect on what they have learned and plan for independent work in punctuation. They may also help the teacher design a rubric for punctuation usage for all future writing pieces.

### **Possible Advanced Studies or Independent Study in Punctuation**

- Punctuation in different genres of writing from e-mail to state exams
- Punctuation usage by one author as part of an author study
- Study of punctuation history or punctuation in nineteenth century literature
- Study of style manuals
- Compare how selected writers interpret the rules
- Study on how punctuation has changed or is changing
- In-depth study of a particular punctuation mark or protocol, such as citations

### *Holding Students Accountable for Use of Written Language Conventions*

- After the initial year of inquiry in a school, teachers should plan vertically exactly what they will expect students in each grade to know and for which marks they will be held accountable
- Construct rubrics with students; after an in-depth study, there should be a full section on the rubric dedicated to conventions. This section will grow as the year progresses.
- Establish audiences for student writing other than the teacher
- Require that students reflect aloud and in writing about how they have used written conventions to convey meaning
- Teach students to use resources to refine their usage of conventions
- Require that students use varied and intentional punctuation
- Refuse to read work that has not been proofread; communicate with parents ahead of time about this; adjust expectation for some learners
- Provide time for students to practice conventions *in their own work*
- Allow students time away from a piece of writing; then return to proofread
- Teach partners to work with each other on punctuation (dictation, trying punctuation out, looking for mentors, etc.)
- Ask students in conferences to talk about what they've learned about conventions from a mentor author – require them to do this! Make this specific and explicit, e.g., “I want my sentence to sound like this one on page 4 of *Loser*, so I used the same punctuation.”
- Display a chart of “noticings,” as well as more formal statements composed by class and teacher; include examples from literature *and from student writing*

### ***Ways to Study Punctuation***

Basic punctuation unit of study (inquiry)

One or more advanced units of study based on student interests or needs

Small group independent work based on support and enrichment

Practice in students' daily writing

Conferring and rubrics to hold students accountable

Punctuation conversations valued

Finding and using mentor authors

Revising old pieces based on new punctuation knowledge

### ***Extending Student Understanding of Punctuation***

Author study

Picture book study

Deep sentence study

Genre study

Study across disciplines or genres

Author comparisons

Comparing an author's work with style manuals

Finding the rules embedded in published work

Comparing style manuals

## **Author Study and Punctuation**

- Model one thing you notice about punctuation using the class study text – plan this carefully
- Talk about it as “a theory” you have about the way this author uses this one punctuation mark
- “Name” what it is and talk about how it affects your reading
- Ask students to look for the same thing in the texts they are reading during the active engagement part of the minilesson
- Send students off to look for it as they read and think about how it affects their reading
- Have students study several author examples of the usage after they’ve found them
- Ask them to use those sentences as models to try in their notebooks or drafts, always thinking about how they want a reader to read their writing
- Make a chart that says: “What Sharon Creech Teaches Us About Punctuation”
- Teach students to use each one of the usages in their writing (or not, depending on the genre they are writing and how unusual the punctuation is)
- Set aside time for reflection in terms of what this author teaches us about “the rules” or what we learn writers do with punctuation apart from the rules

**Punctuation Facts Students Could Find in Chapter One of  
*Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech**

- Basic ending punctuation
- Connecting two independent clauses with a conjunction and a comma
- Using a comma in writing city and state
- Commas in introductory clauses
- Indenting dialogue
- Close quotation marks before dialogue tag, open quotes to continue
- Comma and close quotation marks for interrupting dialogue for tag in mid-sentence
- Apostrophe for possession
- Commas when listing things inside a sentence
- Parenthesis to tack on information, as it giving the reader an “aside”
- Dashes to indicated changing direction or interrupted thought or to clarify something
- When to use fragments (in character’s speech; for emphasis at the end)

**Recommended authors for “punctuation study within an author study”**

- Sharon Creech
- Jerry Spinelli
- Jacqueline Woodsen
- Gary Paulsen
- Richard Peck
- Cynthia Rylant
- Kate DiCamillo
- Donna Jo Napoli
- Madeleine L’Engle
- Natalie Babbitt
- Kevin Henkes
- Jane Yolen
- Avi
- Patricia MacLachlan
- Patricia Polacco

### **Punctuation Study Within a Picture Book Study**

- **Angle this study to either investigate poetic usages of punctuation or to support an understanding of “the rules.” Choose texts that will support what you want students to learn.**
- **Teach students to consider how the text supports the illustrations and visa versa**
- **Consider how punctuation shapes this support of text for illustration *or* of illustrations for text**
- **Consider how punctuation is meant to influence the read aloud aspects of picture storybooks**
- **Using a mentor texts, teach students how to write picture book texts using full punctuation to shape meaning**

### ***Essential Elements of Teaching Punctuation***

- Students discover “hidden meaning” of punctuation through literature
- Students have opportunities to read to themselves on occasions when most of their attention is on the punctuation
- Students have opportunities to read aloud in order to practice punctuation
- Students hear teacher reading aloud frequently, with attention to how punctuation shapes the reading
- Students learn to study literature and find mentor authors to expand punctuation knowledge
- Students begin to process the language of “the rules”
- Students have opportunities to practice punctuation in notebooks, drafts, and their own previously published work

### ***Nonfiction Study and Punctuation***

- Students examine a variety of nonfiction texts to determine how punctuation is used traditionally and how it is used as a text feature (charts, captions, figure numbers, and so on)
- Students look across several nonfiction genres (for example, sports writing versus reports) to notice differences and to discuss how writers used punctuation to communicate something to their readers
- Students discuss how punctuation helps readers make sense of information, including dates, time spans, numbers, quotes, titles, citations, background information, inserted information, foreign language punctuation (e.g., accent, umlaut), font changes and italics, and so on
- Students rehearse reading nonfiction using the punctuation to help them access meaning; they discuss how the punctuation helps them and they negotiate various readings with a partner or small group

### **Teaching Punctuation As...**

- thinking made visible
- communication
- craft
- having respect for the reader
- understanding and using an established “code”
- facility with “the rules”

### **Putting it all together...**

- teach punctuation through studying literature
- teach students to think of it as “code”
- give students time to practice and make mistakes
- ask students to talk about their punctuation decisions
- gently expose students to “rules”
- assess students’ growing fluency through conferences and studying their writing
- make plans for deeper study with students based on their needs
- take time to learn more about punctuation yourself
- work toward making a paradigm shift in how conventions can be taught
- enjoy yourself...join the punctuation “literacy club”

## Studying the “Rules”!

- think about why the rules were written down
- know that style manuals and grammar books don't agree!
- find better ways to do “exercises”
- talk about the rules to make sense of them; using “kid friendly” language
- flag pages for students in reference books
- be willing to violate rules sometimes; teaching students when to do this and when not to do it!
- recognize and accept that punctuation is changing

## **A Punctuation Continuum**

*Least formal to most formal::*

Instant messages

E-mails

Poetry

Informal letters and notes

Memoirs

Personal narratives; personal essays

Feature articles

News articles

Literary essays, book reviews, profiles

Reports; job applications

State writing assessments!

## **Punctuation and Elaboration**

**Students learn that punctuation helps them elaborate their writing by giving them ways to do the following:**

- to add detail, as in items in a series, or adjectives and adverbs
- to indicate an aside by using dashes or parentheses
- to include a definition or clarification
- to indicate the reader should pay attention to what's coming next
- to write long lists within sentences
- to tuck information within sentences in appositives

## **Punctuation and Sense of Audience**

The writer uses punctuation to:

- Address the audience directly
- Add parenthetical or clarifying information
- Use quotes or references effectively
- Guide the reader through transitions
- Manipulate sentence length to suit audience
- Support the reader's expectation for genre
- Help reader follow interruptions or changes in writer's thinking direction

### ***Small Group Work to Support Struggling Readers and Writers***

- Identify students who continue to struggle with punctuation through quick assessments, observation, and conferring; determine clusters of difficulty, if applicable
- Teach guided reading or strategy lesson groups, using same text for all in the group
- Show them how to “talk through” a sentence before writing it
- Model how to stop reading or writing to reread frequently (use music or sports analogies)
- Watch them write or listen to reading aloud and coach them; ask them to rehearse with a partner while reading or writing; honor small success

### ***Some Punctuation Books to Own***

William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*

Ann Stilman, *Grammatically Correct*

Edgar C and Jean Alward, *Punctuation Plain and Simple*

Harry Shaw, *Punctuate it Right!*

Harry Shaw, *Errors in English and Ways to Correct Them*

Martin Terban, *Punctuation Power*

Bill Walsh, *Lapsing into a Comma*

Karen Elizabeth Gordon, *The New Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Guide for the Innocent, The Eager and the Doomed*

Lynn Truss, *Eats Shoots and Leaves*

## **Punctuation in the Real World**

- Students look outside of school for places that punctuation is used, places where it's omitted, and places where it's used incorrectly
- Places to look include ads, store names, billboards, train stations, airport departure and arrival boards, sale posters, clothing tags, mail, flyers, TV listings, bank and post office forms, DVD and CD labels, diner placemats, menus, signs on trucks and taxis, supermarket signs...
- Students meet to talk about how punctuation was used to create meaning, how the "rules" do or do not apply in the outside world, or how, in some cases, they needed to infer punctuation

## **Entering Students' Punctuation World**

***What do they know about punctuation from the following?***

- Sports (spectator and participant)
- The Internet (including emailing and instant messaging)
- Movies (credits, tickets, ads)
- Videogames, computer games
- Music lyrics and music videos
- Music notation
- Board games
- Caring for pets
- DVDs, CDs, and VCRs
- Going to stores
- Vacations
- Comic strips

## **What I Was Doing that Didn't Work!**

I focused on memorizing the “rules.”

I assessed student work from a deficit mentality.

I blamed my students for what they didn't or couldn't do, rather than examining my teaching.

I taught punctuation in isolation.

I taught punctuation as rules that I, or society, imposed on students.

I assigned exercises in isolation and from a “what's wrong with this?” angle.

I taught based on what I remembered from school, not from studying experts.

I never “talked” about punctuation.