**Punctuation: The Power and the Possibilities**

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**Dashed Possibilities**

In my first graduate literature class after several years out of school, I handed in an essay in which I used the “dash” as a punctuation mark in explaining a point. The graduate assistant, apparently seeing the dash as beneath the level of graduate work, wrote on my paper “too journalistic.” Although I never asked for an explanation, I wondered about this comment for years.

Now, in the 19th year of my career change into teaching, I’m sure that the graduate assistant didn’t have a clue. Yet if I’m honest, I have my own sins of rigidity to count when it comes to teaching the finer points of punctuation. While I would never restrict the use of punctuation by a student, I’m not sure I have empowered my young writers as much as I should have, over the years, regarding the power of punctuation. And I am becoming more convinced that—if we really want our students to be skilled and expressive writers—we need to give them all the tools of the professionals.

**One Fine Morning: The Study**

A recent informal study we conducted at my high school confirmed for me my growing sense that all of our students—not just the strong writers—need exposure to and instruction on the full repertoire of punctuation. In an attempt to assess how much our eleventh graders know about the way professionals use punctuation, our eleventh-grade professional learning community—Aletha Sneider, Ginny Perry, Denise Warren, Kelly Hedden, and I, all teachers at Webster Thomas High in upstate New York—began with a newspaper column.

Written by a well-respected local columnist, Mark Hare, this article was about a local police officer who was recovering from a shooting. We selected an excerpt and removed all punctuation marks, replacing them with empty boxes. We then asked more than 200 juniors—the majority of the class—to read the article and to decide which punctuation marks fit best in the boxes. Although we did not provide an official bank of answers, we told students that blank boxes were not an option.

Our first challenge in tallying the results was to determine “correctness,” a more difficult task than we had envisioned. In some cases, our students’ choices were different than Hare’s choices, but our students’ picks worked just as well. Considering such variables, we designed a grading guide to help us determine which choices were the best choices, giving the sentence the most elegance or precision; which ones were technically correct but not really as effective; and which ones were grammatically incorrect choices.

Because of the complexity of the analysis, we decided to limit our close examination to only four types of punctuation use out of the dozen or so on the test. The four punctuation uses were use of proper punctuation marks to break up two full sentences; use of periods to punctuate literary fragments; use of colons to make a transition between an introductory sentence and a full-sentence quotation; and use of dashes to set phrases apart.

**Breaking Up—Not Hard to Do**

We were pleasantly surprised by the responses to the first task—choosing the proper punctuation marks to set phrases apart. Our first challenge in tallying the results was to determine “correctness,” a more difficult task than we had envisioned. In some cases, our students’ choices were different than Hare’s choices, but our students’ picks worked just as well. Considering such variables, we designed a grading guide to help us determine which choices were the best choices, giving the sentence the most elegance or precision; which ones were technically correct but not really as effective; and which ones were grammatically incorrect choices.

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Punctuation: The Power and the Possibilities

to separate sentences. Joining two full sentences with only a comma—a “comma splice” error—is epidemic among our students (as well as students at every level I have taught, from sixth grade through college). However, virtually all our students chose proper punctuation for sentence division (period or semicolon), thus avoiding the comma splice. These results suggest to us that perhaps choosing punctuation marks is easier when we are reading the work of others than it is when we are writing and editing our own work. The other three tasks posed more challenges.

The Fragment: Do We Teach It?
When given a series of fragments, fewer than half of those given the test in the Advanced Placement Language and Composition classes and a small percentage of students in non-AP classes punctuated these fragments properly, with periods. Most others used commas. The rest tried out various combinations of colons, semicolons, and dashes. Although we, as teachers, recognize the student who uses the literary fragment with finesse, our study made me wonder: How often do we take the time to teach students how to use the literary fragment effectively? The parallel structure and repetition in Hare’s fragments allow for a teachable moment on what constitutes “intentional”: “One moment of rage. One bullet. One shot. One act of violence. Many lives changed forever.”

The Colon as Emcee
Although our students have developed impressive skills in quotation integration in recent years, they were unfamiliar with a subtle trick that is common to professionals: introducing a full-sentence quotation with a full, introductory sentence and using the colon as the “glue” between sentences.

DiPonzio’s words were the most powerful: “It is the most difficult thing I’ve had to endure, not just physically, but also by having to watch my family deal with my injuries and rearrange their lives.” (Hare)

Interestingly, few students used the colon, as Hare did in his column, to tie the transition sentence to the quotation; most of our students used the period to do this job. And although this is a correct choice, the lack of use of the colon made us wonder whether we might want to teach, more explicitly, the many uses of this punctuation mark. With models all around us, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find the colon being used, as it is by Hare, as a sort of emcee calling out “TA-DAH!” just before the quotation is matched in.

Dash of Strength
Finally, when we examined our students’ use of the dash, we found interesting results. Hare wrote: “A warm greeting, a smile, sharing a bag of popcorn or a favorite book—small things, yes, but each an affirmation, a way to acknowledge another human being.” Although many students used a comma where Hare used a dash, many others “heard” the need for a longer pause than a comma and chose the dash, the colon, or the ellipsis—all good choices.

Punctuation as Creative Writing?
Perhaps our study was only telling us what some of the experts have been saying all along: Punctuation can be a creative choice, and the more we know about it, the more fully we can express ourselves. John Dawkins has proposed a way of viewing punctuation marks according to how much power they have to separate words, phrases, and sentences. (In Dawkins’s hierarchy of punctuation, for example, the comma has relatively little power; the period has maximum power. The dash is somewhere in between.) By teaching students about the function and power of each mark of punctuation and then allowing them to experiment with punctuation choices, Dawkins writes, “we will be adding to our students’ repertoire of skills; we will be encouraging students to clarify the meanings of sentences and to gain intended emphasis” (548).

We need to teach the full repertoire of punctuation so our weaker students feel empowered—not stuck. Mina P. Shaughnessy of the City College of the City University of New York would argue that basic writers who know only a few punctuation marks are hard put to find solutions to sentence problems. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, as well as conversations with students and colleagues, and a collection of 4,000 placement essays from students entering the college between 1970 and 1974 (1–7), she concluded that basic writers with limited knowledge of punctuation get mired in their errors. Such writers, who might typically
know only three out of at least a dozen punctuation marks available to the writer, “can say little through punctuation, whereas the experienced writer with a command of these slight notations adds both flexibility and meaning to his sentences” (16–17).

Our study helped me to confirm my more recent thinking: Although we always need to be sensitive to readiness, we should ultimately hold nothing back from our writers. Punctuation is an important tool of expression.

And if the promise of more finely nuanced writing isn’t enough of an incentive to teach students advanced punctuation, then consider applications to reading, Shaughnessy advised. For “punctuation provides a map for one who must otherwise drive blindly past the by-ways, intersections, and detours of a writer’s thought” (17). Marie Clay, the renowned New Zealand researcher known for her work in reading, would agree; she viewed the recognition of the conventions such as punctuation marks as critical to the development of readers (9–11).

I once believed that I’d better hurdle through the teaching of the advanced uses of punctuation, for if I did so, then the more expert writers in my classes would have just enough exposure to these things to “catch on.” The struggling writers would only get more confused if I spent too much time on it anyway. Our study helped me to confirm my more recent thinking: Although we always need to be sensitive to readiness, we should ultimately hold nothing back from our writers. Punctuation is an important tool of expression.

My earlier misconceptions ignore our most compelling reason to teach the finer points of punctuation to our weaker students: Many of them are already using more advanced rhetorical strategies—without a clue how to punctuate them. I now try to spot the risk-takers who lack the punctuation know-how to show off their potential. It is not uncommon for a struggling writer to use a would-be literary fragment to open an essay or a memoir but then to attach it to the next sentence with a comma. (“Hockey, it’s the sport of heroes . . .”). The comma is often a bad choice that produces a weaker opening than the student has envisioned. (Ask a student to read the words aloud, and we see that his words might be better conveyed by something like, “Hockey. It’s the sport of heroes . . .”).

Even the purist of language purists, William Safire, Pulitzer Prize–winning author and New York Times political and “On Language” columnist, dedicates a chapter to the fine points of fragments (as well as chapters dedicated to apostrophes, semicolons, commas, and hyphens) in his witty, authoritative book, How Not to Write: The Essential Misrules of Grammar. Safire’s book, with rules that “straighten you out without weighing you down” (8), reveals respect for style and choice.

In reality, however, the “textbooks” on how to use punctuation well are all around us—in the columns written by our most well-respected writers, online and in print. If we want to teach our students to master writing, then we need to look more closely at the best writing of the pros—and then share the secrets.

Works Cited


Mary Heveron-Smith is in her 14th year of teaching in the Webster Central School District. This is her tenth year teaching at Webster Thomas High School, where she served as lead teacher for English for three years. She began her career as a newspaper reporter and copy editor, later becoming a college publications director. She began this article while participating in the Genesee Valley Writing Project at the University of Rochester in summer 2010.
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Day 40

CAPITALIZATION:
1. the cathedral of hagia sophia, located in istanbul, turkey, and once part of the eastern orthodox church, is now a museum.

PUNCTUATION:
If the entire sentence is not a direct quotation, place quotation marks only around the required item. However, place a period or a comma within quotation marks.

Ex.—Have you read the article, “Imagine”?
I read the article, “Imagine.”

2. Amused Jacys mom entitled her short story The Mad Mother

PARTS OF SPEECH: PRONOUNS
Remember:
Nominative pronouns can serve as the subject or a predicate nominative of a sentence. Nominative pronouns include I, he, she, we, they, who, you, and it.

Subject: Who opened the door?
Predicate Nominative: The art-contest winner was he.

Proof: He was the art-contest winner

Write S if the pronoun serves as a subject; write PN if the pronoun serves as a predicate nominative.

3. a. ____ Before lunch in a cafe, they went to a home-supply shop.
b. ____ My aunt is she in sandals.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT:
Underline the subject once and the verb or verb phrase twice.

4. a. That group of girls (dance, dances) at professional basketball games.
b. A stroke (result, results) in a sudden loss of brain activity.

SENTENCE COMBINING:
5. Hannah is a disc jockey.
She owns her own company.
Her company is called Roundabout Entertainment.

EGUS Grade 9: Day 40

Explanation:
1. Students practice capitalizing the first word, a building, a city, a country, and a religious reference.

2. Students learn placement of quotation marks as well as periods and commas within titles. They also practice the apostrophe with a possessive noun and a comma with both an introductory verbal and an appositive.

3. Students learn nominative pronouns and an easy “proof” for correct pronoun usage.

4. Students practice subject-verb agreement. Concepts are introduced and practiced cyclically throughout.

5. This sentence combining is designed to encourage students to use relative clauses in their writing.
What sort of changes are you and your colleagues working on for this year?

Better content literacy instruction
Better integration of technology
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