



Punctuation

Punctuation shows how to read words and sentences on a page.

- Knowledge of punctuation helps a writer decide how to make their intended meaning clear.
- The ‘rules’ of punctuation are hotly debated.
- Like other aspects of language, punctuation is continually evolving, especially in digital and social media texts.
- Research has found that skill in using punctuation is supported by teaching which focuses on purpose in writing and its effect on the reader.

Punctuation reveals the meaning in a piece of writing. It shows the reader how to read the words and sentences in the text: when to pause, when to make the voice rise to indicate a question, when to be emphatic. Just as with grammar, knowledge of punctuation is essential so that a writer can decide how to make the intended meaning absolutely clear. Looking carefully at how published authors have used punctuation can help young writers to see how they can use different items to create the effect they want in their own writing.

Despite the importance of punctuation, it is one of the least researched (but most complained about) aspects of language development in respect of how children come to understand it. The ‘rules’ of punctuation have long been a site of controversy, and debates about how and where to punctuate are exacerbated by its continual evolution as digital and social media texts have influenced its use. All this adds to the formidable challenge for a young writer of orchestrating all the complex elements that are needed to make meaning in written language.

Research into learning punctuation has found that skill in using it is supported by a classroom atmosphere in which writing is purposeful and attention is strongly focused on its effect on the reader. The classroom ethos and children's experience of a range of text forms encourage talk about language and an interest in punctuation and its effects. Punctuation is not learned best through rules and drills. Instead, children need to see how punctuation marks affect the meaning of writing that matters to them.

Sources

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Hall, N. (2009) Developing an Understanding of Punctuation, in R. Beard, D. Myhill, J. Riley and M. Nystrand (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Writing Development*. London: SAGE. pp. 27-283.

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Classroom example

Experimenting with ellipsis

A class of 10 and 11 year olds are currently undertaking a class writing project in which they are writing Flash Fiction – very short narratives. The mini-lesson which is to precede that day's writing time is about how authors use ellipsis. Their writer-teacher explains that she rather enjoys using ellipsis dots in her story writing. She goes on to explain that ellipsis dots are a great way of showing that a conversation or an event isn't finished in your story. They create a pause that can change the pace or build suspense, just as in real life!

She proceeds by showing the children the effect ellipsis has had on some of her writing in the past. Her example shows hesitation. Her other three examples are taken from books within the class library and show how ellipsis is used to slow down the pace to build suspense, add a poetic quality and tease the reader by not giving a definite ending.

To end the mini-lesson, the writer-teacher comes back to the fact that the use of ellipsis dots is especially effective for ending Flash Fiction, when you are writing a really short piece, and states that readers can often enjoy being tantalised like this. Finally, she invites the children to use an ellipsis in their writing today and to keep an eye out for where and why the writer uses them in the book they are reading.

Eve Bearne, Felicity Ferguson, David Reedy and Ross Young on behalf of UKLA

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