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Teaching Punctuation with Literature

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Teaching Punctuation with Literature

Key Questions / Issue Explored

Students in the United States' Public K-12 Education system are subject to be taught Standard American English without given any explanation as to why this standard exists, why it matters, or why authors choose to utilize language the way they do. Often, teachers lead students to blindly follow SAE handbook rules. In order for students to be able to fully comprehend written language, they need to be able to understand when to stretch the conventions of the written English language and to be able to validate their choice in doing so. Utilizing a touchstone text (a regularly referenced text to study with over time) or a mentor text (a text to model a particular skill), students will have prolonged exposure to help conceptualize these choices and their effects; this brings both organic teaching material and literary exposure together. The need for organic teaching material comes from the over-use of examples crafted specifically for lessons and to simultaneously expose students to texts that are naturally found outside of academics. Students need to be able to see and read materials that are realistic. Without authentic and organic material students will often care significantly less about the context of the lesson and lack the knowledge of what authentic texts are, or how to create their own. This also allows students to be able to have more of a grasp on how and when different tools are utilized and gives them a more realistic sense that these tools are valuable in their own unique ways. This research explores the stylistic punctuation choices of various authors and how both teachers and students can utilize literature to teach, learn, and manipulate the understanding of style and language as a tool. This dissection of literature can be applied to most any text but will focus on popular fiction novels in classrooms for their cultural and academic values. This project is the start for any teacher or student to begin to unravel the

power in punctuation and learning how to manipulate language to fit a specific purpose. This project and presentation is to inform teachers on how to teach students to make defensible punctuation choices in their own writings, while using a mentor text. As teachers, we need to advocate for multipurpose literature, and advocate for the creative choice that writers have and teach students how to decisively make those choices.

Through the course of identifying what texts to use, one of the most obvious options would be to choose a text that is already familiar to teachers and their classrooms. I chose *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury for a few reasons: it was a choice book in my own high school experience, I was left awestruck by the story, and the language captivated me in numerous ways. The way this novel captivated me was never something I took the time to understand, I blindly accepted the language. If *Fahrenheit 451* is a text I want to teach in the future, I am going to need to understand the language that is used at a deeper level than how I read it the first time around – the way my students will likely also experience the novel. As a teacher, I need to prepare myself with extreme concision so I can offer answers to those who seek and more.

When we read a novel, it is typically read to either be consumed for enjoyment or to be critically analyzed. The punctuation that authors choose is critical to how a reader perceives the novel and what they experience while reading. We know this to be true, and especially emphasized by Ehrenworth, “that punctuation is both a navigation tool and an interpretive, artistic one. It helps us, as readers, make our way through texts, signaling when to pause and stop, alerting us to switches in action and thought” (93). But if our students cannot comprehend why these decisions are made, then the author’s work is all for naught. Students need to be able to understand the meanings of these ‘road signs’ in language, as Ehrenworth and Dawkins explain, not just so they can read and comprehend accurately, but so they can become crafty creators of their own texts. When assigning literature for reading, cultural, and critical thinking

development, as teachers it is our responsibility to show students how to place these 'road signs' in language.

Methodology

I chose to analyze the first 15 pages of *Fahrenheit 451* to create a large sample for analysis. I omitted recognizing dashes when they are only used to connect a word across two lines. When there were multiple words connected with dashes as modifiers, I counted each dash and word individually to properly exemplify their usage. And in the case of em-dashes, all were counted even though some were insinuated with periods and other forms of maximum separation. Finally I collected the number of maximum separations and other punctuation to calculate the average number of punctuation marks per 1,000 per word count.

Studying the works of John Dawkins, most specifically "Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool" helps exemplify the hierarchy of punctuation use and how to share this information in the classroom. These levels of separation are described by Dawkins in his article as periods being maximum separation, bringing the end to a sentence, commas, dashes, parenthesis, colons, etc., are all part of minimal/ medium separation. Each piece of punctuation is place by the author for a specific reason. If punctuation marks weren't unique, they would be ambiguous and not be the guiding tools readers need punctuation to be. These different levels are the exact differences we innately feel while we read, and it "actually helps us make meaning and sense of texts" (Ehrenworth). It is these very meanings that need to be understood at a fundamental level in order to teach students how they work.

After surveying *Fahrenheit 451*, I conducted a basic survey open to the public asking what their favorite fiction novels from high school/college were. I excluded plays, poems, and other forms of literature variant from the novel to maintain consistency in my text samples. A

few of the top novels from this survey were *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. The large majority surveyed attended the same school and read all of these novels in high school, thus having high exposure to the same novels, but they are still highly respected books among high school English teachers. I repeated the same process analyzing the first 15 pages of each novel. All data can be found in attached Appendix A, Tables 1-4..

Summary of Findings

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury

As displayed in Appendix: Table I, Bradbury uses commas in high concentration. This is due to him writing long connected sentences that resemble the constant connection in the stream of consciousness alongside short sentences that also reflect the fragmented pieces of an individual's inner thoughts. There are also longer sentences that contain zero commas entirely that are utilized again to create a change in how quickly – or slowly - the story seems to move forward. One of these sentences does not require any commas based on SAE conventions, however, it adds to the extreme contrast in how Bradbury utilizes commas. He could have chosen to break everything down and connect them with minimal separation, but he did not. In his standard prose, he tends to include many more modifiers, adjuncts, and complements rather than just one detailed descriptive phrase at the end of the sentence. This is the sentence exemplified:

And he knew that he was also the old man who talked to him and talked to him as the train was sucked from one end of the night city to the other on one long sickening gasp of motion (121).

This sentence almost begs readers to read this aloud in one exhausted breath, much like the train moving along in the story. His use of commas in his narrative create many different breaks within one continuous sentence, giving the illusion of maximum separation while only providing minimal/medium. Bradbury rarely chooses any other form of minimal /medium separation punctuation compared to the comma. This was confirmed with the survey of the first fifteen pages of the novel as seen in Appendix: Table 1. Although he does utilize all forms of separation, the ratio is high in contrast. To many the comma is the most common form of medium separation, but the difference is still staggering. Ray Bradbury's own writing style brings two ends of the extreme of comma use and sentence variation together. But what is consistent with his work, is that the use of both ways he utilizes punctuation exemplify and imitate natural human thoughts and behaviors. If he did not utilize punctuation like he has, the impact on the reader would not be nearly as emotional or empathetical.

***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**

Through the first fifteen pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* there are a few things that are easy to observe. Generally, as represented in Table 2, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has a more diverse use of punctuation marks that both connect and disconnect sentence structures. Naturally in the written English language, and confirmed on a small scale in appendix A, there is more commas and maximum separation used compared to other forms of punctuation. However, Lee utilizes a diverse variety in punctuation marks. This sentence exemplifies the variety of punctuation present in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "Boo wasn't crazy, he was high-strung at times. It was all right to shut him up, Mr. Radley conceded, but insisted that Boo not be charged with anything: he was not a criminal" (12). There are phrases present that could have been simply separated with

another comma or period – e.g. the last phrase “he was not a criminal”, but Lee chose otherwise (12).

Harper Lee’s writing style does something unique in the fact that her punctuation choices inherently bring details closer together through her medium separations. In contrast, however, that can also separate other details further from each other. For instance, in the exemplified sentence the colons and commas bring together details that rely on each other for effect, but the periods do their standard job of separating clauses. This variation in connections and disconnections add a depth to the details readers will be consuming that is unique to this structure. Many details could have been connected differently in compound sentences or in completely separate sentences, but rather Harper Lee often utilized minimum and medium separations to delicately connect phrases together. This delicacy in connection mimics how the human naturally pieces details together. Based on personal experience, a human’s inner dialogue tends to be crafted of long sentences strung together with short phrases.

As a reader, this creates a complication in how we perceive the details presented. It forces readers to unconsciously connect phrases as they are reading that might be separated in a multitude of ways. It can be easy for an inattentive reader to skip over these variations in mild/medium separations, and the small details within, but it is a part of the literature that is meaningful and purposeful.

***Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly**

In the original version of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly utilized a semi-colon more frequently than any other book surveyed in this small study. The writing and punctuation style are constructed of many simple sentences being added onto another sentence structure into compound or complex sentences. Often times there are supplemental adjuncts within sentences,

that add to the complexity of descriptions, which in turn adds to the depth of emotional perspective for readers. An example being, "A new light dawned upon my mind; and, bounding with joy, I communicated my discovery to my father" (63). What Mary Shelly does here is utilize the way sentences can be layered within themselves, structured into multiple layers of phrases and clauses that add to one full meaning. Had she rather separated details with maximum separation, the detailed inlayed in the sentences would be distanced from each other. As a writer, utilizing more medium separation in narration creates a more complex of perspective and experience for the readers. With this combination of complex sentence structures alongside simple structures, it makes for the novel to present itself as the true inner thoughts of the protagonist. All of these layers give reasoning to the high concentration of semi-colons and commas in Shelly's work.

The entire way the novel is written follows a large variation in sentence structures, with a strong reliance on the comma, semi-colon, and forms of maximum separation. As according to Dawkins, when connecting independent clauses with commas rather than separating them with maximum separation, it creates an emphasis on the details being connected (538). These punctuation cues are important to understand the importance of these details. As students begin writing on their own, to be able to understand and demarcate their own marks of high separation for emphasis. Studying how Shelly manipulates and layers details and structures Although students might not need to be able to structure a complicated story right away, "Students benefit from paying close attention to models before they begin drafting a piece of writing", and this novel demarcates a complex way to write down a character's inner dialogue in a complex but guided way (Gallagher).

Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* does a marvelous job at taking the relatively scrambled thoughts of a young child and dictate them excellently, with great help from her guiding

punctuation. Her ability to create a hierarchy in the sentence structure allows for better navigation of sentence structure understanding of details, experiences, and environment.

***Lord of the Flies* by William Golding**

Through surveying *Lord of the Flies*, it became apparent that the punctuation used by Golding was diverse but also very specific in use. The em-dashes are highly present due to how the children speak in their dialogue, and the hyphens are also largely present in the children's dialogue as compared to an adult's dialogue. These reflect the speech often seen in children's verbal communication as fragmented and jumbled when not giving speech forethought. These pieces of medium separation in how they spoke are related to the nature of cutting each other off, injecting supplemental ideas in between. An example being "Here, the eye was first attracted to a black bat-like creature that danced on the sand, and only later perceived the body above it" (14). Even though this sentence is not dialogue from the children, the narrator describes the scene in a very similar fashion, opening the sentence with an adjunct, then a clause with modifiers connected by a hyphen, and following with a dependent clause. This particular sentence structure is deliberate in craft, having similar descriptions and phrases to that of the children's stream-of-consciousness, but this similarity provides readers with consistent structure to follow. The way the sentence is structured forces readers to pick up details in the exact same order as the characters do, and connects these details through the punctuation.

Golding could have easily utilized more maximum separation in the descriptions and other structures in his story, but what happens when there is a consistent use of punctuation when dialogue is interjected, readers are able to understand things closer to the way the characters themselves are experiencing the story. Although there is high-volume of punctuation in Golding's writing, his patterns in how punctuation is used is entirely systematic, giving his

readers implicate meanings with different types of marks. This is evident in the lack of ellipsis and parenthesis in Golding's writings. These two could have been applied easily throughout the novel, especially when characters are cut off in dialogue or when interjecting a phrase into another sentence. The lack of those two adds to the consistency in Golding's choices through the relative chaos that is being narrated. If he *were* to make the choice to use all types of medium separation, there would likely be more confusion as to what each punctuation mark means in reference to the rest of the writings. One of the most prominent examples is the em-dash, which is almost exclusively used to mark when a character's dialogue is cut off by someone or something else. Other authors also use an ellipsis for this purpose, but Golding *only* uses the em-dash. This reinforces the guidelines and signs a reader needs to follow to interpret the language as authentically as possible in his writing style.

Applications:

It is a requirement as teachers to teach to our students what written language means and how to recognize all the composition tools they unconsciously utilize in their daily oral language. In the Common Core State Standards, students are supposed to master is to "Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" (CCSS, ELA, 11-12:4). The idea is to show students what established authors have done - from the selections that are taught in the classroom already - and what these patterns of writing and punctuation change in the way readers interpret the story and emulate those skills. When students have the chance to read literature for class discussion alongside finding ways to theorize why authors make the choices they do, it allows for more interaction with the material, allowing students not only to consume the story in the words, but to learn from the way these words are structured. This is similar to another study

where they integrated learning how to manipulate language while they learned how to garden and read the texts that come with gardening (Paugh and Moran). Creating meaningful discussion on practical choices gives students a firsthand chance to see *why* they matter. Incorporating numerous models and texts can also help show students how their writing tools are applicable to more than just one form of writing. The following are more suggestions on how to utilize these texts in the classroom.

Activity: Book Talk

For *Fahrenheit 451* specifically, I would suggest to read the first small section with the utmost inflection and attention to the punctuation provided. Doing so gives students the opportunity to hear how the language that Bradbury creates moves with and around the punctuation. In this very first, small section he uses many of his common stylistic choices to elevate the introduction: short, simple sentences; more complicated sentences connected by commas; and to utilize the hyphen to not separate details, creating running sentences and unique descriptions. Showing students the variation that he creates in just these first few chapters sets up an awareness while they read the rest of the novel.

Activity: Author Blurb

This is an activity based on Cathy Fleischer and Sarah Andrew-Vaughan's discussion on the Author Blurb and how students can emulate skills presented in specific genre's and texts. The author blurb is on most books, being a small paragraph about the author's life, accomplishments, and other relevant information. This genre of text is small, local, and easily reachable by students, and is something that many are already familiar with. Take the time to show students multiple different blurbs and identify the features of all these texts; some being their name (the format of the name), the authors education, their big accomplishments, where the author works, and other relevant information. By showing students multiple different

blurbs, this allows students to see the commonalities between texts of the same genre as well as the variants within the genre. Having a list of conventions within the genre, as well as the ways authors choose to be variant from those conventions, allows students to have a model and a guide when they go to create their own blurb. This activity can be assigned lieu of a book report, or as a biography, or just a fun ice breaker style activity.

Activity: Annotations

Show students at this early point different forms of annotations and require them to turn in a written down form of annotations during parts of the novel of sections that stood out to them for various reasons (confusing, beautiful, interesting, surprising, etc.). These can also act as checkpoints to see if students are on track and how closely they are paying attention. Ask students to pick their favorite passage from a reading section and make that an example for the class's lesson on parsing and then creating a functional interpretation of Bradbury's choices. A grid worksheet with the original quote, tools used, observations, and meaning can also assist students in visualizing what choices go into writing.

Activity: Scavenger Hunt

An option to see just what skill level students operate at, create a scavenger hunt in the text for students to recognize the different rules of commas, to recognize different sentence structures, or to question why something is written a certain way. This is a possibility not just for SAE conventions, but other writing tools that push the limits of standards. This could follow a similar worksheet of the annotations: marking the location, marking the meaning, marking the reason for its use, and marking why it matters. Creating a small competition between classmates would bring more extrinsic motivation into play, to either find the most unique example or to find the most. After finding all their examples, share them with the class and copy down other students' finds so that there is more contact with the specific skills at play in a text.

Activity: Free Write - Free Rules

Over the weekend, challenge students to bring something in the next class that is unique and pushing the limits of these rules; the catch is that they need to be able to defend each and every one of the decisions they made. This way, they are aware of the rules they are using, pushing, or ignoring, and that their choices are defensible for effect. If there is something incorrect in their versions, this would be the time to clear any confusion that some students might have either in one-on-one help, or through whole class instruction. It is still necessary to make sure students are not confused during and after the overarching lesson plan, especially when teaching students how to bend the rules set before then by SAE expectations.

Activity: Blank Text

One possibility to encourage both creativity and competition would be to give students a piece of text (either an excerpt from a published piece or a section of their own work) with no punctuation in it. Have students fill in the punctuation where they believe it would fit best, by both grammatical rules and their own stylistic choices. They must be able to defend the marks that they did or did not make, and the class can weigh in on the decisions made to try and find the best or more impactful series of punctuation marks.

Ask students to swap their drafts and then take a moment for students to analyze the differences between their original composition and their partner's idea of how it should be written. Create this into a class discussion on why certain decisions were made. If there is not much discussion that is naturally blossoming, have a few back up examples that were created at home. The idea behind this activity is to give students more control how they exercise what they know and are learning. If teachers expect students to just practice using conventional grammar for the State assessments, they will potentially feel little to no creative freedom, or lack the confidence to try something that would be considered an 'error' by SAE conventions.

Students “need to own the rules of grammar, not be enslaved to them, so that they can manipulate and use them, each to their own unique end” (Ehrenworth 88). The goal here is to get students to think like writers, and to postulate their own writing choices and processes.

Katie Wood Ray talks about making theories with students as to why other writers make the choices and summarizes well why it matters to discuss these choices rather than focus on the right ones:

Making an incorrect theory about why a writer did something a certain way in a particular text is always a possibility, but it’s not really a problem. We are trying to see what we see in the author’s text for *ourselves*. ... We are simply looking at her well-written text and wondering about why *a writer* ... might choose to craft that way. ... You see, what we want is for students to understand their own writing as a process of decision making (123).

Do remember that there is no 100% correct way for a student to make their mark on the paper, so it is also important to remind students that they need to be confident in what they do so they can defend their own efforts. It is only when there is no defense that their solution can be problematic. The reason this is so important for students to validate their own exploratory work is that “They need to be innovators and creative thinkers, problem solvers and pioneers, or else they risk being marginalized again, condemned to the ranks of the functional” (Ehrenworth 87). Only learning the skills of being ‘functional’ as Ehrenworth references will render students limited in their skills and ability to transfer unique skills to different discourses. These limits in their writing will follow students through their whole life; they need as many writing tools as possible that are transferable to many discourses. Without this shameless trial and error, students will indeed fall into the ranks of the functional and never have a safe

environment to try things, to fail, and to learn from the decisions they make in their punctuation choices.

Conclusion

After the first novel and various exercises practicing different techniques modeled after a specific author and story, continue applying these same investigatory skills and application to student exploration. The goal is to create an atmosphere where students are more aware when they are reading literature that is assigned in the classroom, more aware of the language being used, more aware of the structure, and to understand the effects language creates on them as consumers. Giving students the examples and tools from real world literature and texts allows them to better realize that these tools are usable, and not just remedial grammar lessons. The goal is to give students the confidence to fearlessly play with punctuation and how it will change the effects of a text's message. Creating knowledge, creating confidence, and sharing literature all packed into creating a better understanding of the tool language really is.

After conducting all my readings and data research, it has become abundantly clear that there is a need not only for model and touchstone texts in the classroom, but there is also a need for students to learn the skills that authors they read use when composing. Numerous authors call for teachers to utilize material that is found in the real world, and in doing so only provides more realistic and useful resources for students (Gallagher, Hesse, C. Fleischer and S. Andre-Vaughan, Marchetti, Ray). Students need contact with real texts from outside of the classroom bubble in order to study form, style, language, and in order to best succeed later on in life. Utilizing the literature teachers already use in the classroom alongside other examples provides a more realistic view of the texts in the world, the skills that writers use, and how students can emulate those skills and transfer them to other work. The process of studying a

mentor text is not new, and neither is the idea that students need more real-world materials in their education. But teachers of future generations need to make more of an effort to expose students to as many texts as possible and the skills writers use in different discourses. This is all to show our students the infinite range of possibility the world of writing brings to them, and how these skills will apply to the rest of their lives.

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Appendix A

Table 1: *Fahrenheit 451*, pages 1-15 minimal/ medium separation punctuation

Punctuation	Occurrence in pages 1-15	Ratio of punctuation occurrence to 1,000 words
Colon :	3	.6707
Comma ,	323	72.2110
Ellipsis	5	1.1178
Ellipsis . . .	1	.2236
Em dash -xx-	12	2.6827
Hyphen x-x	20	4.4713
Maximum Separation .!?	357	79.8122
Parenthesis (xx)	1	.2236
Semi-colon ;	10	2.2356

Table 2: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, pages 1-15 minimal/ medium separation punctuation

Punctuation	Occurrence in pages 1-15	Ratio of punctuation occurrence to 1,000 words
Colon :	22	4.4186
Comma ,	301	60.4539
Ellipsis	2	.4017
Ellipsis . . .	5	1.0042
Em dash -xx-	12	2.4091
Hyphen x-x	42	8.4353
Maximum Separation .!?	267	53.6252
Parenthesis (xx)	1	.2008
Semi-colon ;	32	6.4270

Table 3: *Frankenstein*, pages 1-15 minimal/ medium separation punctuation

Punctuation	Occurrence in pages 1-15	Ratio of punctuation occurrence to 1,000 words
Colon :	8	1.5646
Comma ,	260	50.8507
Ellipsis . . .	0	0
Em dash -xx-	5	.9778
Hyphen x-x	4	.7823
Maximum Separation .!?	226	44.2011
Parenthesis (xx)	0	0
Semi-colon ;	66	12.9082

Table 4: *Lord of the Flies*, pages 1-15 minimal/ medium separation punctuation

Punctuation	Occurrence in pages 1-15	Ratio of punctuation occurrence to 1,000 words
Colon :	6	1.4044
Comma ,	232	54.3071
Ellipsis . . .	0	0
Em dash -xx-	24	5.6061
Hyphen x-x	38	8.8951
Maximum Separation .!?	356	83.3333
Parenthesis (xx)	0	0
Semi-colon ;	10	4.4475