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## Teaching Punctuation: Seventh Graders, Mentor Texts, and Commas

*The authors explore how students can gain knowledge of basic writing conventions by studying mentor texts.*

Teacher 1: *I'm grading papers, and do you know what the number one problem is—again?*

Teacher 2: *Careless spelling?*

Teacher 1: *No, it's commas. Students misuse them, or they don't use them at all. I don't know about you, but I can't read for content when I'm so distracted by the incorrect use of conventions.*

Teacher 2: *Well, have you taught your students basic comma rules? You know, we teach them how to remember dessert from desert, affect from effect, and everyday as an adjective versus every day as an adverb...*

Teacher 1: *I remember being taught that whenever you take a breath, you use a comma, but I know that's not reliable. It's too arbitrary, you know? You and I could read the same paragraph and pause differently. There are definitive rules that guide writers. I think I'll search for examples in authentic text, and that might be the focus of next week's mini-lessons.*

Teacher 2: *You know, you might be onto something. But what's most important is that students feel free to express themselves, unconstrained by "the rules." I clearly recall my own experiences in school when conventions mattered more than the content, and believe me, you don't want to go there."*

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The above vignette elucidates one of the dilemmas of English teachers. How do we attend to conventions without stifling emerging writers'

written expression? The complexity of teaching students the craft of writing has resulted in many approaches to help them internalize and use language concepts in meaningful ways. In my seventh-grade English classes at Harlowton High School, I previously relied heavily on our English text, Houghton Mifflin's *Write Source*, along with photocopied worksheets to teach conventions, such as comma placement. Embracing the idea that repetition aids learning, I dutifully distributed these worksheets, and my students practiced isolated skill instruction. Not surprisingly, they failed to transfer the information from these dull drills to their own writing.

After grading another batch of papers and noticing yet again their confusion with commas, I decided something needed to be done. It was time for a mini-lesson with explicit instruction that spotlighted punctuation. What would happen, I wondered, if students were invited to scrutinize professional writing—an engaging short text—and identify patterns for when commas were used? If they could discover the *when*, maybe they could formulate an explanation for *why* commas were needed. After all, we had talked about the importance of authors using precise words to communicate with readers, so why not extend this to a discussion of comma use? It made sense. Middle school teacher Jeff Anderson's *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop* reports how some teachers love

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grammar and some hate it, but nearly all struggle to find ways of making the mechanics of English meaningful to learners. After years of experimentation, he suggests how and why skills should be taught, connecting theory about using grammar in context with practical instructional strategies (Anderson 3). It made sense to focus on the most common errors—frequently occurring misuse of commas—and show students how to determine their placement. I hoped a mentor text would anchor students' understandings, much like a carousel's central pole supports the rotating circular platform of mounted wooden horses.

### Rationale for Comma Knowledge

A writer's use of punctuation can either aid or diminish the effectiveness and clarity of a message. While some conventions can be absorbed easily, others require focused instruction. Commas fall into the latter category. Interestingly, 30% of items on the English sub-test of the ACT College Entrance exam concern comma usage (Dulan 12). Some comma rules are simple, such as the serial comma. As early as second grade, children learn to join a string of words that share grammatical rank—for example, a list of nouns or verb phrases—with commas. At other times, commas can be ambiguous. When it comes to professional writing, in certain instances, commas are left to personal opinion (Truss, Norris). If teachers can help students become proficient with the most reliable and most frequently used comma rules, developing writers will then be equipped to make judgments about more complex writing conventions as their language and writing abilities grow.

### Review of Related Literature

Schunk and Zimmerman claim “modeling is an effective means of building self-regulatory and academic skills and of raising self-efficacy” (7). Certain academic skills, such as composition and mechanics, can be effectively taught through the careful selection and presentation of mentor texts. Teachers find these models in books, newspapers, magazines, or online; they can be any texts that

bring real-world writing into the classroom and demonstrate successful deployment of writing strategies. “Anything we read, anything that moves us, can be used as a touchstone text, a mentor text” and should “contain interesting writerly moves, powerful sentences that are elegant, that have meaning and purpose and will engage the students” (Paraskevas 66). In lower grades, mentor texts are frequently used to nudge students to explore a particular writing form. For example, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* captures the narrator's recollections of growing up in rural Appalachia. Cynthia Rylant's masterful use of intentional repetition with the repeated phrase, *when I was young in the mountains*, helps tell the story of a coal-miner's family. Notwithstanding its effectiveness, using read alouds as the centerpiece for instruction is often overlooked in the upper grades. But high school English teacher Kelly Gallagher (2011) observes, “Students write better when they are given mentor texts to help guide them” (16).

Exposing students to the elevated writing level of mentor texts gives them something to emulate and provides a target. Having students mimic mentor texts challenges them to produce writing “that they would not necessarily create on their own, thus helping them expand their natural repertoire of syntactic constructions” (Paraskevas 66). Ralph Fletcher claims that good writers must know “how to play with words, ideas, sound and meaning” (xi). Just as a budding musician might start out copying the sounds of acclaimed musicians he respects, Paraskevas reminds educators that a student can be an apprentice to more seasoned writers by copying their styles, word choice, and mechanics, internalizing those skills, and making them his own.

The de-contextualized drill-and-kill strategy of teaching grammar has been patently ineffective. The product of an entirely different understanding of mechanics, this approach views grammar as a set of rules to be followed and emphasizes memorization. If, on the other hand, teachers see grammar as a tool for powerful

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writing, their instruction will likely emphasize the study of experts' models. According to Paraskevas, "Years of research have made it clear that grammar taught in isolation does not contribute to the writing skills of students" (65). This is unfortunate because despite its ineffectiveness in everyday writing, many teachers default to this method of language instruction. Lacina and Block investigated writing instruction in urban districts and found that "middle schools in the U.S. do not routinely use writing strategies, collaborative writing, statements of specific goals for writing, word processing, inquiry activities, the study and analysis of good writing models, and writing for content learning in the majority of the classrooms" (13). These methods of instruction could be the keys to unlocking student passion for writing and supporting their growing proficiency as writers, but if educators stick only to inauthentic grammar worksheets, students will be unlikely to experience writing milestones. Hillocks identified that "the emphasis on the presentation of good pieces of writing as models is significantly more useful than the study of grammar" (160). Though students may know what an adverb is, lacking the ability to use that part of speech in their own writing renders the process of identifying adverbs useless. If students were provided with consummate models, they could draw from what the experts do. Lacina and Block note that "It is critically important that aspects implemented within the elementary program are expanded in an intensified manner to the secondary level," including the increased use of mentor texts as models for effective writing (13). Knudson reported, "One of the oldest, if not the oldest, ways to teach children to write is by presenting them with model pieces of writing" (94). Similar to the way babies imitate adults when acquiring verbal and motor skills, students must be given role models to look to when discovering how to write.

Using mentor texts for language arts instruction connects the disciplines of reading and writing so that students have a better understanding of the English language. Once

treated as discrete, isolated subjects, practitioners nowadays know that reading and writing are complementary processes that should be taught simultaneously. Carefully planned instruction that invites students to discover the links between these literacy twins "can lead to better, more effective writing if it is done in the context of reading and writing, with an eye toward connecting grammar to rhetorical and stylistic effects" (Paraskevas 65). The recently implemented standards initiative in the United States recognizes that reading and writing are inter-related. At teacher meetings, the conversation centers on helping readers use their knowledge of text to craft compositions grounded in authentic writing experiences. Not only do the Common Core State Standards ask students to examine the craft and structure that authors employ, the assessments used to measure student progress on these standards utilize writing prompts that require students to be critical readers (Gallagher 86). Readers who have learned to scrutinize texts are then better able to use language purposefully when they write. Fletcher observes that "writers string together written words in order to communicate ideas, thoughts, feelings, arguments, events, perceptions and insights" (2). Teachers are the conduit when they provide instruction that helps tentative writers express their ideas with clarity and confidence.

In order to reap the benefits of a merged approach to reading and writing instruction, students need to examine the words of authors as well as how they present their thoughts. Using model pieces of writing makes explicit the connections between reading and writing. Observing authors' purposeful use of language and conventions can guide student writers as they explore options during the composing process. Additionally, by making students aware of writing craft, both in their own practice and from the sources they read, teachers are encouraging critical reflection. "Our students are awash in texts, and as readers, it is essential that they understand how the working parts of these texts are manipulated to

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shape arguments, hold their attention, and persuade them to ‘buy in’” (Zuidema 63). Adolescents who comprehend the intentional placement of punctuation are not only better able to understand texts, but they are capable of critiquing an author’s style and words.

### Action Research

Action research is “any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching-learning environment that involves gathering information about the ways in which their particular schools operate, the teachers teach, and the students learn” (Gay, et al. 486). My action research project emerged from a genuine need to explain comma basics to my students.

In preparation for the lesson, I studied my collection of children’s literature to find the just-right story with a plot that would appeal to thirteen-year-olds. When I picked up dePaola’s text, I knew I had potential for a dynamite lesson. Having authored over 100 books, Mr. dePaola’s contribution to the world of children’s literature has been sustained and significant (2002). Furthermore, the Indian paintbrush is a wildflower familiar to my students. But best of all, the text employed varied uses of the comma, and they matched to the five I wanted to teach. Prior to introducing my seventh graders to dePaola’s writing, I was concerned that they might not be able to think critically enough to determine *why* the commas on the page were placed there. From my informal observations, I found that asking students to hypothesize about language concepts was difficult for a couple of reasons. First, in order to introduce the basics of writing conventions to young children, teachers often simplify the explanation. For example, they might tell developing writers to *use a comma where you take a breath* or that *paragraphs have five sentences*. Students, in turn, might interpret these guidelines as rigid rules. Additionally, my students were used to acquiring language arts information from the *Write Source* textbook, which was full of directives

and how-to lists. Seldom had students been asked to interact with an exemplary piece of writing to analyze the author’s language decisions. For these reasons, I was unsure how well my class would accomplish the objectives of this comma lesson.

### The Mini-Lesson

On day one of our comma study, I shared that commas are found everywhere, but determining how to correctly use them can be confusing. The over-generalized principle of “put a comma whenever you pause” would not help in high school because teachers would expect correctness. Punctuation clarifies the author’s meaning, and unfortunately, misplaced commas disrupt the reader’s flow.

To gauge students’ prior knowledge, I asked them to identify all of the reasons that writers use commas. I recorded their responses on chart paper: (1) to separate the day from the year, (2) to separate a city from a state, and (3) to separate items in a list. Then I announced that we were in for a treat—a special story that we would be using for the next couple of days. After reading aloud Tomie dePaola’s *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush*, I provided students with a transcript of the text, where I had circled commas and numbered them. Instead of answering comprehension questions, we would be re-examining the text for commas. Our focus, I explained, was to pay special attention to the places where the author placed a comma and to determine *why*. My goal was that students would understand that commas are used (1) to separate nonrestrictive phrases and clauses, (2) to separate two independent clauses when joined with a coordinating conjunction, or FANBOYS, (3) to separate a direct address, (4) to separate an introductory clause from the rest of the sentence, and (5) to separate items in a list.

Research supports the use of “think alouds” to help students understand that the composing process is recursive and complex, not linear and simple (Spandel). When teachers model the inner dialog that expert writers experience as they make

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decisions about words and sentences, the writing process can be demystified. Seeing teachers questioning themselves as they compose can help students appreciate that a writer's decisions are intentional. Having used "think alouds" in reading comprehension lessons, I decided to try them in a different instructional context. As I read aloud *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush*, my students enjoyed the compelling story and beautiful language. We then revisited the text as I conducted a "think aloud," wondering out loud why dePaola might have planted a comma at a particular juncture. This experience helped my students discover five major comma categories that mapped to my five comma rules. For each rule, we found examples in the text that we could easily reference because the commas had been numbered. The lesson transitioned to small groups. Working in clusters of three, students analyzed comma usage for the remainder of the story. While circulating, I observed that some students had difficulty putting their reasoning into words; however, their discussions showed that they were attempting to find meaning and purpose behind punctuation. If using a mentor text could heighten students' awareness of how writers use a commonly agreed upon standard or practice for punctuation, like commas, then what potential there must be to teach more complex concepts, such as sentence fluency or idea development.

### Discussion

Though the Montana Common Core Standards for seventh grade only indicate that students should know how to use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives, they state that students should be able to "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking," (MCCS L.7.1) and "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing" (MCCS L.7.2). These two broad standards compelled me to dedicate class time and teach fundamental comma generalizations. When seventh graders enter my classroom with the

vague understanding that commas are used whenever the reader needs to take a breath, multiple approaches and meaningful practice are needed to mediate these misconceptions. According to deOnis, students are empowered when they understand the "why" of a concept (42). By providing the context for students to discover why commas are critical in conveying meaning, teachers advance students' skills in using this punctuation with intentionality.

*The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* mini-lesson taught me that one well-chosen text could showcase numerous examples of several comma conventions. More broadly, because mentor texts are versatile, teachers can use them to teach a host of other writing skills. As I reflect on this experience, I hope that my seventh graders have become more empowered to understand the decisions authors make. At the end of the lesson, Cassie, one of my students remarked, "Now I understand when to use commas. Before this, I just sort of guessed, and most of the time it seemed to work. But now I know when a comma is needed. In a way, it's just as important as the period." Cassie's comment shows that focused attention on conventions can make sense to students. When I planned this lesson, I expected my students to struggle, but they surprised me with their level of engagement. They understood my primary lesson objective: Writers punctuate sentences in order to communicate with their readership. However, I also realized that they would need additional practice with other mentor texts before they would become fully independent. Rather than learning from the out-of-context examples that appear in our English textbook and trying to make these lessons relevant, a much better plan was to capitalize on the language elements abundant in a polished piece of writing—and in a story that captures the hearts and minds of students. *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* accomplished both. Seventh graders could readily identify with Little Gopher's conflict of how to use his artistic talents to help his tribe. Like Little Gopher, they, too, are

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exploring their strengths and pondering how they can use them effectively.

Through this study, I have found a superior instructional approach to use with my junior high English students. They value active learning, and drills out of a book are insufficient. Furthermore, some abstract concepts of writing instruction, such as voice and sentence fluency, are difficult to explain. Using mentor texts *shows* students what good writing looks like. The texts of de Paola and other authors can be used to showcase language features. When students “read like writers,” they are working at the higher level of Bloom’s taxonomy. Looking critically at text and exploring options is what writers do in real life. That is the lesson I wanted my students to understand. Subsequent scaffolded instruction and “think alouds” with mentor texts provided that additional practice for my seventh graders to anchor their emerging understandings of the five comma guidelines. By observing the craft of published writers, students understood the importance of correct comma placement. Mentor texts gave them concrete examples of what authors do in real-world writing. Going forward with this knowledge, students will be empowered to create purposeful text that communicates clearly to the reader. Knowledge is power.

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