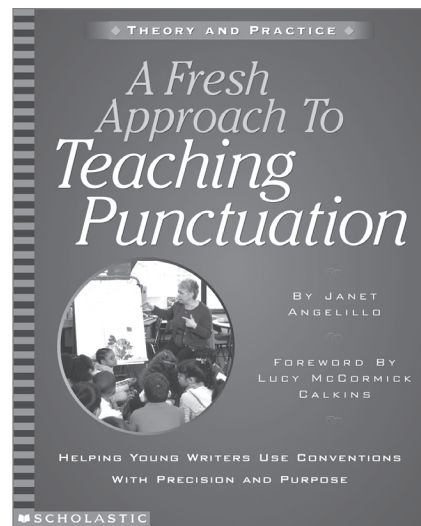


A Study Guide for
A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation

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Part 1: Thinking About Your Practice

How do you currently teach punctuation in your classroom?

- To what degree do you focus on memorizing the “rules”?
- Do you ever blame students for what they can’t or don’t do, rather than examine teaching methods?
- Do you teach punctuation in isolation?
- Do you teach punctuation as rules that society imposes on writers, or do you see it as a code for accessing or conveying meaning?
- Do you assign exercises in isolation and from a “What’s wrong with this?” angle?
- Do you teach punctuation based on what you remember from school, or from studying experts, style manuals, and texts?
- Do you have punctuation conversations with student writers? Do you express delight at the artful use of a comma or appropriately place semi-colon?
- Do you discuss writers’ punctuation decisions in shared or read-aloud texts?
- Do you refer to style manuals to help with punctuation decisions?
- Do you give students opportunity to “play” with punctuation?
- Do you provide opportunity for punctuation practice within the context of writing?

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- Do you do your own writing in front of students and talk aloud about your punctuation decisions and confusions?
 - Do you convey to students that punctuation is one of the qualities of good writing, but understand well yourself that good punctuation is not the only measure of good writing?

How do you assess students' use of punctuation strategies?

- Do you feel obligated to “correct” every line of student writing, marking what appears wrong and expecting students to “fix it”?
- Do you assess student punctuation work from a deficit mentality, that is, what they can't or aren't doing, rather than what they are trying to do?
- Do you consider learning punctuation as an ongoing skill, and therefore expect varying degrees of skill among students, with understanding occurring at many levels?
- Do you assess students' work frequently and use your assessment to drive your instruction?
- Do you provide differentiated instruction for students based on needs on either end of the spectrum?
- Do you construct rubrics with students that reflect what they have learned about punctuation?
- After punctuation has become part of the classroom discourse, do you hold students to a high standard of punctuation use without violating their developing writing skills?

What resources do you have to support punctuation instruction?

- Do you have a classroom library with a wide variety of genres and authors?
- Do you read aloud to students several times a day from different genres?
- Are there several punctuation texts available in your room for student reference, as well as several adult style manuals for your reference?
- Do students write every day, have a system for collecting their writing in one place (notebook or folder), and do they reread their writing every day?
- Do you have charts in the room to make punctuation study public?
- Do you have highlighters, sticky notes, colored pens and pencils, and scrap paper for students' use?
- Do you have access to computers where students can revise and edit, but can keep and show the changes they have made as evidence of their thinking and learning?

Part 2: Chapter Overviews: Study Guide

Questions and Actions

CHAPTER 1: Planning for a Year of Punctuation Work

In Chapter 1 you will be introduced to a paradigm shift in thinking about written conventions. Students must learn to pay attention to how writers use punctuation to shape meaning. Using their own writing, they must also practice shaping the meaning of their own writing by using punctuation. Punctuation study must be embedded in authentic reading and writing experiences, and must become part of the classroom conversation all year long.

React To

We don't want to confuse "mentioning" with teaching. Modeling by writing in front of a class, examining writing together, and looking at samples of children's writing is very different from just telling students something and expecting them to go off and do it. Study that is deep and wide accomplishes much more than reminders and nagging ever can. (p. 35)

Discuss

- How do you presently allow for students to practice written conventions?
- How can you use the writers' notebook for ongoing practice in writing?
- How can you raise student consciousness about punctuation by examining together how they use it to access meaning in their reading?
- To what extent do you make time for deep and thorough examination of how the "experts," that is, writers, use punctuation rather than hammering at the rules?
- How can you change your perspective from a deficit mentality of student work to noticing what students are gesturing toward or where they are in their zone of proximal development?

Take Action

- Ask students to talk about punctuation decisions they have made as writers and why they made them. Use this information to assess students' understanding of written conventions. Be wary of "teacher pleasing" answers; listen for evidence of thorough understanding of punctuation usage.
- Begin to collect picture books (both fiction and nonfiction) that contain interesting punctuation in them. As you read aloud to students, notice punctuation and comment on how it helped you to read and understand the text. Notice punctuation in the "real world," such as in ads or on menus, and comment on it to students. You will be bringing punctuation to the forefront of their thinking even before you begin serious study.

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- Examine your curriculum calendar to see when you can fit a sustained inquiry of two weeks into your plans.

CHAPTER 2: Starting With What Students Know and Notice: A First Unit of Study in Punctuation

In this chapter you will follow a class on its first inquiry into punctuation using Big Books and independent texts. The class focuses on the author's intentions and on noticing how the author wanted to shape our reading of the text. Whole-class and small-group work suggestions show ways to meet students' needs and extend student learning.

React To

With few exceptions, children are amazed and interested. For once, they are being asked to look at something besides the words to see how writers make the words work together to create meaning. We have opened their eyes to a new world, a world of nuance and shade. And, because we believe in inquiry, we are asking them to “figure it out,” rather than telling them the answers or giving them the rules. (p. 39)

Discuss

- How could you accomplish the same goals without access to Big Books? What other texts might you use?
- How will you support students who claim they “don’t get it”?
- How can you make provisions to design and display the chart in your room and to continue to expand it as the year goes on?
- How will you communicate to parents that you are engaging in deep inquiry into punctuation and that they will see increasing accuracy as the year goes on?
- How will you informally assess student learning and use that assessment to plan further instruction in punctuation?

Take Action

- Confer with students asking them how they are using punctuation to shape their reading. Confer again asking how they are using punctuation to create meaning in their writing.
- Allow students to talk about and “play” with punctuation. Establish partnerships where students can discuss “how they want their writing to sound” and get feedback on which punctuation will do that.
- Make sure the chart is accurate and readable. Refer students to the chart when they have punctuation questions.

CHAPTER 3: Building on Students' Knowledge: Follow-up Units of Study

This chapter looks at ways to extend students' experience with punctuation beyond examining texts, practicing in notebooks, and discussing with peers. By assessing your class's needs, you may decide to plan additional punctuation study of an author, a genre, or deep study of one punctuation mark across content areas.

React To

The two units of study on punctuation (the introductory unit and the follow-up study) make the students' writing more precise and correct. The children understand that deep study and practice are essential to learning anything well. And the teachers who follow the work closely learn that merely perfunctory teaching of conventions only sends the message that punctuation is of small importance. When they are given the real-world tools of writers, children enjoy creating writing that makes sense. (p. 63)

Discuss

- Which units of study in your calendar will lend themselves to a punctuation slant?
- How can you consider embedding punctuation study as a quality of good writing in every unit of study?
- Which authors do you and your class love? How might they lend themselves to punctuation study?
- How can you create a culture in which students look to mentor authors for punctuation as well as for craft and ideas?

Take Action

- Decide when in the year you will fit in the additional study. Begin to make plans early in order to collect texts with interesting punctuation for the later study. Examine student work to ascertain which punctuation marks they need to study in the second punctuation unit; choose authors, genres, or a single mark accordingly. Allow for independent study of any of the units as well. For example, for the student who loves a particular author or genre, he or she can study the punctuation and use it to inform his or her writing.

CHAPTER 4: "Hearing" Punctuation: Read Aloud and Other Oral Reading Activities

In this chapter you will see how reading aloud to students holds such power for teaching them punctuation. Through reading aloud, we teach students the way reading should "sound," and we can model for them by thinking aloud about our decisions as readers when we see punctuation. Punctuation is therefore a "code" which must be understood in the same way that the combinations of letters that make up words must be understood.

React To

Many students do not understand that written words are meant to be reproduced in a spoken voice or a voice in their heads. So, one of the most powerful things we can do is read aloud to children, because it gives them a sense of the way texts should sound. We model for them how we, as experienced readers, use our voices when we read... Modeling our reading voices and, in the process, translating punctuation to voice, are valuable activities. (pp. 65–66)

Discuss

- Which read-aloud texts might be most valuable and accessible for your students as examples of interesting punctuation? How can you choose some read alouds based on punctuation interest while insuring they fit into other criteria you have for choosing read alouds?
- How can you use partners or small group work to facilitate this work?
- How will you gather evidence in order to assess student learning?
- How will you hold students accountable for using punctuation as they read to shape meaning?

Take Action

- Be sure to read aloud to students every day, several times a day, if possible. Choose a variety of genres, and mine each text for as much as you can. Don't stop with predictions or comprehension, but think aloud about craft and about punctuation. Ask students to use some of the punctuation from the read alouds in their own writing or to point out to you when they have used your read aloud modeling to inform their own reading. Help students to practice their "reading voices" in conferences (*not in round-robin reading*). Coach them as they to read the punctuation marks.

CHAPTER 5: Conferring With Children: How It Informs Our Punctuation Mini-Lessons

This chapter focuses on conferring as a way to research and assess what students know about punctuation. Conferring is a powerful tool for gathering information, and teachers should use the information to inform their teaching. Ideas for later lessons can come from conferring. This chapter also includes groups of mini-lessons that grew from information gathered in conferences.

React To

When we see ourselves as teacher-researchers, watching our students and shaping our teaching around observations, our teaching becomes sharp, focused, and precise. (p. 81)

Discuss

- How do you use conferring to inform your teaching?
- How do you use conferences to support students' knowledge of punctuation without pointing out and focusing on "errors"?
- How can you use conference notes to track students' ongoing learning in one or more discrete skills—for example, students' facility with punctuation?
- How often do you confer with each student and how can you improve the quality and frequency of conferences?
- Which mini-lessons have you done that came from information you gathered in conferences?

Take Action

- If you do not already confer regularly, begin to figure out ways to do it immediately. Ask a colleague to help you brainstorm ways to get more done in less time. Consider rearranging furniture to facilitate conferring; move from table to table with your own small stool rather than calling students to your desk or the back of the room. Establish a method for taking notes in conferences. You may have to try several systems until you find one that works for you. When you do, stay with it. Reread notes regularly to look for learning patterns and to plan some conferences in advance.

CHAPTER 6: Reading and Writing by the Book: Weaving Punctuation Study Into a Literature-Based Program

In this chapter, you will see that authors are the real experts when it comes to punctuation. Studying authors, not grammar texts, is what will teach students that punctuation is a powerful and complex tool. Looking at authentic texts helps students learn punctuation and then holds them to a standard of punctuation use.

React To

Rules are important guidelines that set standards for how written conventions work. But, just as I don't need to know the laws of physics before I ride a bike, I don't need to memorize punctuation rules before I start using punctuation in writing. At some point, I will learn those physics laws, and those punctuation rules, and they will make sense to me because I have seen how they work. Students who learn to read, and then write with, punctuation will most likely understand the rules when they eventually study them. (p. 89)

Discuss

- How can you use sports, science, art, or music analogies to help your students understand punctuation?

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- How do you feel about the “rules”? Do you base your punctuation knowledge on what you learned in school? Do you have a favorite rule book to which you always refer? Why?
 - How can you use authentic literature to teach students to write complete sentences when they don’t know subject and predicate?
 - How can teachers acknowledge and affirm that there is a punctuation usage continuum? How can the conventions of instant messaging and electronic mail be reconciled with the conventions of academic writing? Do you believe that we should honor all types of usage depending on genre and purpose? Why or why not?

Take Action

- Read several style manuals to research how there are slight difference in “rules” from one to the next. Discuss with other teachers how students may be getting different messages from one teacher to the next. Check out the style manuals on the web and note changes in conventions.
- Include student appropriate books on punctuation in your classroom library. Flag pages that have rules you think students might want to look up, such as rules for commas in a series or use of a colon. Provide time for students to read and discuss what the books say and look for examples of rule usage or breakage in authentic texts. Make a chart of a few rules, with literature examples of following and breaking the rule. For both, have students write why the writer did it.

CHAPTER 7: Passionate About Punctuation: Conducting Advanced Studies

This chapter focuses on supporting students who become fascinated by punctuation. When students are treated as learners who can figure out most anything, they often take up the challenge and surprise everyone with their passion for any topic. You will read about mid- and end-of-year studies in punctuation that push students to deepen their knowledge and improve their facility. Independent study of punctuation and self-evaluation are also important pieces of a total punctuation immersion. This is what teachers can do when students want to know more about punctuation, and how to encourage them.

React To

Indeed, there are many angles from which to study forms of writing, and punctuation is only one. We could focus on many others, such as word choice, sentence length, voice, use of grammar, theme, tone, mood, and elements of story. Although we single out punctuation, it would be odd, if not a downright literary crime, to look always and only at the punctuation in a piece of writing. We, as teachers, must see beyond the “mechanics,” or at least, we should see written conventions in insightful ways. And we must teach our students to do the same. (p. 104)

Discuss

- How might you provide time for advanced punctuation studies that do not center on authors or genres?
- How could punctuation study across content areas prove valuable? How would you plan this?
- What role does self-evaluation play in helping students become life-long punctuation learners?
- How can punctuation be used as a powerful revision technique?
- How can you build in time for students to revisit writing that is months old to re-punctuate it using their new knowledge?

Take Action

- Be sure that you develop eyes to see student writing beyond the “mechanics” used. Look for craft or use the six traits of writing (see Ruth Culham, *6+1 Traits of Writing*, Scholastic, 2003) as lenses with which to view writing.
- Teach students to reread their writing immediately and then to reread it again after time. A few weeks away from a piece can help students see needed changes.
- Push students to notice the punctuation in more difficult texts, and to build theories about what the writer’s punctuation intentions were. Continue to confer often and regularly, sometimes focusing on punctuation.

CHAPTER 8: Losing the Red Pen: Evaluating Written Conventions

In this chapter, you will face the difficult question of how to evaluate punctuation. Examining student writing while thinking about how the student has grown, what he or she is demonstrating about learning, or what he or she is attempting to do make evaluation of writing much richer and provides validation for students.

React To

It’s important to accept that children will make punctuation errors as they attempt to write more complicated sentences, just as they will make errors in grammar. We must think of punctuation as an ongoing skill to be continually refined and mastered as children grow as writers. (p. 122)

Discuss

- What is your philosophy about the purpose of student evaluation?
- How do you feel about the need to “correct” every student mistake?
- Do you feel your students work as hard as you do to proofread their finished work? Why or why not?

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- Do you believe there is a difference between editing and proofreading?
 - How does the school culture about student work affect your decisions when you read student writing?
 - How can you make your students' writing more "public" and transfer more of the onus of responsibility to them?
 - How can you teach students that punctuation is a unit of composition, not something to be sprinkled on later, preferably by the teacher?
 - How can you change your work from proofreader to teacher?

Take Action

- Begin to see your conferences as ways to teach and evaluate student work. Begin the paradigm shift from the teacher who is responsible for every jot and tittle to the coach who is there to build independence in student writers.
- Ask students to help you compose a rubric that will reflect what they've already learned about punctuation. Hold them responsible only for what you have already taught. Be willing to return writing that shows little respect for punctuation and let students have another go at it.
- Read Pico Iyer's essay "In Praise of the Humble Comma" (in *Kitchen and Jones, In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, W.W. Norton, 1996). Use quotes from the essay on your walls. Muse on how it might change your attitude toward evaluating punctuation.
- Enjoy the journey.