

The ingenious comma

Age: 8 to 15

Unit Length: 1 to 3 weeks

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Description

Is there anything imaginative or exciting about punctuation? Well, someone invented the comma, after all, had a reason for doing so, and had hopes and fears like the rest of us. It may be that we can't find the original inventor, but we can find the reasons the comma was invented, and see it through the eyes, and purposes and emotions, of those unknown inventors. In early texts there was no punctuation, just letters, one after another, filling all the space on a page or tablet or stone. Reading was difficult and, to make sense of a text, one would most commonly read aloud. The invention of punctuation was revolutionary. Its inventors transformed the world and people's lives much more than did Caesar, Napoleon, or all the celebrated military and political figures who loom large in our history books.

Unit Outline

Here is a unit worked out with Ms. Chou for a grade five class in her multi-ethnic school, and taught by her. One of Ms. Chou's virtues, it seems to me, is her recognition that students' imaginations are engaged by the richness of the content itself--they are not to be "hooked" by some neat idea and then have the material taught in traditional ways. The "hook" for her is the same as for the imaginative education approach in general; it is the wonder inherent in the material itself that has to be brought out. Her aim is to enlarge her children's understanding by making sure they understand the content of the curriculum. She is known as a teacher dedicated to making sure her students learn the specified material, and she has what many consider remarkable success.

Partly her success is due to her assuming that the imaginations of all her children, despite the variety of ethnic backgrounds and not a few dysfunctional backgrounds, can be engaged by such content as the comma. Many teachers in her school, with the best of intentions, see the primary need of many of these children as social and emotional support, and they consider such things as comma use as largely irrelevant to their needs. Yet it is the hard-nosed Ms. Chou, who very deliberately emphasizes the content, who seems to be most valued by these kids. They see her as having faith in them simply because she clearly thinks they can learn well such features of good literacy practice as the proper uses of the comma.

1. Identifying "heroic" qualities

What heroic human qualities are central to the topic? What emotional images do they evoke? What within the topic can best evoke wonder?

The framework directs us first to identify heroic qualities, affective images, something wonderful, something "heroic" about punctuation. That might seem quite a challenge, particularly to those of us who were taught punctuation by traditional methods in school. I suggested earlier that one could introduce such a topic by putting it into the wider

context of the historical story of writing's development. This is the approach Ms. Chou took, believing that their historical background is often a good way of humanizing topics that look purely technical. Someone invented the comma, after all, and had a reason for doing so, and had hopes and fears like the rest of us. Our task is to see how the comma can be fitted within this human network of emotions, hopes and fears. It may be that we can't find the original inventor, but we can find the reasons the comma was invented, and see it through the eyes, and purposes and emotions, of those unknown inventors.

In early texts there was no punctuation, just letters one after another filling all the space on a page or tablet or stone. Reading was difficult and, to make sense of a text, one would most commonly read aloud. Punctuation is made up of a set of simple, elegant, and ingenious inventions that have been added to texts to make them easier to read. The heroic quality we settled on, then, was this simple, elegant, ingenious, inventiveness.

How does this emotionally engage us? Because, on reflection, we see that the comma has probably had more impact on human lives than all the military leaders in history. Their exploits come and go, but the revolution wrought by the comma's power will outlive them all.

Main heroic quality: elegant ingeniousness

Alternative(s): influence in transforming human societies

Images that capture the heroic quality: the tiny comma resting in one side of a weigh scale and all the military forces with their armor, tanks, and guns in another, and the comma dragging the scale down and driving the other upwards. The slight mark on paper making language, that had always been an oral exchange, from mouth to ear, hospitable to the eye. Language has become silent, reading has become accessible to all, and the lowly comma has helped create a revolution in building democracy by giving this new power to access text to all.

2. Organizing the topic into a narrative structure

2.1 Initial access

What aspect of the topic best embodies the heroic qualities identified as central to the topic? Does this expose some extreme of experience or limit of reality? What image can help capture this aspect?

A newspaper editor might ask: "What's the story here?" Our story is the revolution that has had an immense impact on our civilization and even on our very sense of ourselves. It is the story of the profound shift from the reliance on the ear for access to knowledge to reliance on the eye. It is a part of the story we have briefly examined above of moving in the West from an oral to an oral and literate culture, with all that that has entailed. In this story, the comma plays a decisive role in transforming text so that it can be easily read and its meaning easily grasped. It is an important part, also, of the story of democracy, as reading texts became increasingly less a task for a skilled Èlite and more accessible to all. Spaces between words, paragraphs, sub-headings, capitals and lower-case letters, periods, quotation marks, exclamations points, and the mighty comma, all

help to divide up the text into meaning chunks that elegantly permit us to engage in this curious silent communication.

Given our narrative line, we may decide to take the punctuation marks either in the sequence of their historical development or, which turns out to be much the same, in the degree of their impact on making the page hospitable to the eye. This narrative line, incidentally, brings into the topic some items not normally considered matters of punctuation, such as the separation of words by spaces. Ms. Chou began with just that, seeing what a dramatic impact spaces have on students' ability to read or at least begin to sort out the page of text. She prepared a series of sheets of the same text but each page was changed by a punctuation invention. The first sheet was the text as it might have appeared in the earliest form of writing. The next sheet showed the effect of the invention of capitals and lower-case letters, the next the mighty comma and full stop, and so on. Each item was introduced in terms of its contribution to the move from ear to eye, and each was presented in terms of the simple elegance and ingenuity by which it achieved its dramatic impact. Here are just three of the sheets she used:

THEFIRSTACTIVITYOFTHECLASSMIGHTINVOLVEGIVINGTHESTUDE
NTSAPIECEOFTEXTWITHOUTANYPUNCTUATIONSIMPLYALLTHEWO
RDSFLOWINGTOGETHERWITHNOBREAKSCOMMASFULLSTOPSOR
ANYOTHEROFTHEELEGANTANDECONOMICALCUESTHATMAKETEX
TSEASILYACCESSIBLETOTHEEYEHEYWHATDOYOUMAKEOFTHIST
HETEACHERCOULDASKJUSTSEEINGHOWMUCHMOREDIFFICULTIT
ISTOREADWILLGIVESOMEIMMEDIATESENSEOFFAVALUEOFPUNCTU
ATIONHAVETHESTUDENTSREADTHETEXTALOUDTOHEARRATHER
THANSEEHOWMUCHEASIERITISTOTHENMAKESENSEOFCHOOSES
OMETHINGWITHLOTSOFQUOTATIONSSUBHEADINGSANDSOONGR
APHICILLISTRATIONEHWATSALLTHATSOMESTUDENTMIGHTSAY

THE FIRST ACTIVITY OF THE CLASS MIGHT INVOLVE GIVING THE STUDENTS A
PIECE OF TEXT WITHOUT ANY PUNCTUATION SIMPLY ALL THE WORDS
FLOWING TOGETHER WITH NO BREAKS COMMAS FULL STOPS OR ANY OTHER
OF THE ELEGANT AND ECONOMICAL CUES THAT MAKE TEXTS EASILY
ACCESSIBLE TO THE EYE HEY WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS THE TEACHER
COULD ASK JUST SEEING HOW MUCH MORE DIFFICULT IT IS TO READ WILL
GIVE SOME IMMEDIATE SENSE OF A VALUE OF PUNCTUATION HAVE THE
STUDENTS READ THE TEXT ALOUD TO HEAR RATHER THAN SEE HOW MUCH
EASIER IT IS TO THEN MAKE SENSE OF CHOOSE SOMETHING WITH LOTS OF
QUOTATIONS SUBHEADINGS AND SO ON GRAPHIC ILLISTRATION EH WHATS
ALL THAT SOME STUDENT MIGHT SAY

The first activity of the class might involve giving the students a piece of text without any punctuation, simply all the words flowing together with no breaks, commas, full stops, or any other of the elegant and economical cues that make texts easily accessible to the eye.

"Hey, what do you make of this?" the teacher could ask.

Just seeing how much more difficult it is to read will give some immediate sense of a value of punctuation. Have the students read the text aloud to hear rather than see how much easier it is to then make sense of. Choose something with lots of quotations, subheadings, and so on.

Graphic illustration, eh?

"What's all that?" some student might say.

Depending on the progress students have made in their program, the teacher might prepare additional sheets of text with no punctuation. For beginning students, Ms. Chou composed a quite simple piece of capitalized, spaceless writing; for more advanced students she prepared a longer and more complex piece. Students were invited to begin by putting a line where they thought there should be a division between words. After that they were invited to locate where the commas or full-stops should go. And so on. Even students with very little skill in reading began identifying word groupings. For students who might have difficulty even with this task, one could scramble the words used in the text on a separate sheet.

Images that capture heroic quality: the comma as superhero!

Exotic/extreme content that best embodies the heroic quality: the unsuspected power of the comma—along with its tiny allies, the full stop, spaces, quotation marks, etc.—as transformer of the world

2.3 Humanizing the content

What aspects of the story best illustrate the human emotions in it and evoke a sense of wonder? What ideals and/or challenges to tradition or convention are evident in the content?

We can humanize the material by reference to the hopes of those who introduced the various innovations. We can see the struggles that they were involved in and the interests of those who resisted the innovations. Ms. Chou was able to draw on some of the background materials made available by the Imaginative Education Research Group. So she was able to talk, and show illustrations, about the particular effects of each innovation, demonstrating the heroic quality of the tiny punctuation allies, led by the might comma. That is, it wasn't necessary to locate individual people, but the comma itself was imbued with the heroic qualities that made it engaging to the students' imaginations.

Our research was able to add anecdotes about some of the particular heroes of this story. Useful resources included Ivan Illich's book on Hugh of St. Victor (Illich, 1993), or the rich set of examples in David Olson's *The World on Paper* (Olson, 1994). She used the examples to show how huge social and psychological changes were brought about in the revolution involved in making texts easily readable. The truly revolutionary nature of punctuation was emphasized early on. Its inventors transformed the world and people's lives much more than did Caesar, Napoleon, or all the celebrated military and political figures who loom large in our history books. But the comma was invented by someone, and she dramatized the image of a medieval monk, courteously working in his cell to make his manuscript page more easy to read, and coming up with this tiny mark that indeed helped to make reading a much easier activity for all.

She also demonstrated to the students the general principle of comma use that refers back to their own body as its human core. They were encouraged to think of writing as making oral language visible. Where we pause when speaking, we use punctuation marks when writing; the commas serves for brief pauses and the period for longer pauses. She suggested this as the most general, fall-back, rule when they were uncertain, making clear that it was not itself a sure guide.

What content can be best shown in terms of hopes, fears, intentions or other emotions? the comma and its allies being invented as a result of courtesy, as the medieval monk struggles to make his manuscript easier to read.

2.4 Pursuing details

What parts of the topic can students best explore in exhaustive detail?

One aspect of comma use students might study in exhaustive detail is how different meanings can be created by strategic placement of commas within the same sentence or phrase. Ms. Chou made a lot of use of sets of unpunctuated sentences, asking the students to try to create different meanings by changing only the comma use. Here is one of the simplest she used: "You have no idea what I think", can also become the different "You have no idea what, I think". A variant on this: "A pretty tall girl" can be "A pretty, tall girl" or " A pretty tall girl"--as in a rather tall girl. "Birds that migrate occasionally fly high" yields "Birds that migrate occasionally, fly high" and "Birds that migrate, occasionally fly high." "The year before John went away" could be changed by a comma to the different meaning "The year before, John went away." Students were invited to consider the difference between "John and Jane did not marry because they wanted security" and "John and Jane did not marry, because they wanted security." (The first implies that they did marry, the second that they did not.) "Jane claimed John made the mess" is crucially different from "Jane, claimed John, made the mess."

Students were also given simple introductory materials with which to study the history of the comma, and then were encouraged to make an Internet search to add to their initial knowledge. The students were given basic information, such as that the word came directly from the Greek komma for "clause" or "segment," and the various ways commas have been indicated, as with a "/" slash mark in early medieval times.

She divided the class into twos and threes and gave one group the task of summarizing the arguments in favor of including and omitting the final comma in a series. That is, some argue for "a, b, and c", whereas others prefer "a, b and c." Other students were given other rules to explore and report back on. One clear result of this activity was to demonstrate that there are no ultimate rules for comma use, and that people's uses through history and today vary. The main rule might be understood to be the courtesy that produces clarity for the eye of the reader.

List those aspects of the topic that students can explore exhaustively: the variety of ways a comma can be used to change a sentence; the history of the comma; the various and variable rules of comma use.

3. Concluding

How can one best bring the topic to satisfactory closure? How can the student feel this satisfaction?

Ms. Chou gave students pieces of unpunctuated text, and asked them to transform the meaning by their uses of punctuation--a more elaborate form of the exercise mentioned

above. A nice example used to introduce this exercise was taken from Donald J. Sobol's *Encyclopedia Brown stories* (1986).

Tyrone wants to send his girl friend a message that he wrote as:

"How I long for a girl who understands what true romance is all about. You are sweet and faithful. Girls who are unlike you kiss the first boy who comes along, Adorabelle. I'd like to praise your beauty forever. I can't stop thinking you are the prettiest girl alive. Thine, Tyrone."

Unfortunately, Tyrone read the message to Adorabelle's sister over the phone. She wrote it down, but had no idea how to punctuate in such a way as would capture Tyrone's meaning. Poor Adorabelle received this message:

"How I long for a girl who understands what true romance is. All about you are sweet and faithful girls who are unlike you. Kiss the first boy who comes along, Adorabelle. I'd like to praise your beauty forever. I can't. Stop thinking you are the prettiest girl alive. Thine, Tyrone."

The students clearly enjoyed re-punctuating a piece of text to make it mean something dramatically different. Ms. Chou prepared a number of unpunctuated sentences, to which commas can be added in such a way that different meanings are imposed on the words. (She used the examples above and those from the previous chapter: "Private! No swimming allowed!" means something quite different when punctuated as "Private? No. Swimming allowed." Similarly "I'm sorry you can't come with us," means something different from "I'm sorry. You can't come with us." Or "the butler stood at the door and called the guests' names" is radically changed, by a tiny difference of punctuation, to "The butler stood at the door and called the guests names.")

She had some examples of eighteenth century writers in English who favored the dash over commas and periods, so that students might conclude the unit by considering the arbitrariness of our forms of punctuation. For the final exercise, students were given a few lines of unpunctuated text and asked, in the process of punctuating it, to invent at least one new punctuation mark, displacing one of the current conventions if they wish. The emphasis was on acknowledging the simple elegance and ingenuity of our techniques of punctuation, but recognizing that they are only conventions, useful as long as they are useful, to be changed and discarded when not. But their uses and values became clear as students dealt with texts that lack them. The purpose of the exercises was to help bring out the inventiveness involved in punctuation, and give students some sense of wonder about its impact.

Concluding activities: playing with punctuation to influence meaning to add to the growing understanding of the power of the comma and its small allies.

4. Evaluating

How can one know that the content has been learned and understood and has engaged and stimulated students' imaginations?

Any of the traditional forms of evaluation can be used, but in addition, teachers might want to get some measure of how far students' imaginations have been engaged by the

topic, how far they have successfully made a romantic engagement with the comma. In addition, the concluding activities (above) are also evaluative in nature.

Ms. Chou added to traditional evaluative techniques careful observation of the degree to which individual students recognized that punctuation is not merely a utilitarian convention but is a product of much ingenuity. Those taken-for-granted squiggles and marks on a page have a heroic quality of their own as elegant and ingenious revolutionaries in a great adventure. We were not able to find a means of getting any objective index of students' sense of the heroic quality of the comma but, if the teacher is sensitive to its importance, some alertness to it can lead at least to an informal qualitative assessment.

Some of the exercises in the main body of the lesson, such as having the students punctuate the same sentence in two different ways in order to produce different meanings, were also used to yield good evaluative data.

Forms of evaluation to be used:

recall of general rules, as exemplified in students being able to use them on set texts;
observation of students' sense of the "heroic" nature of the comma in human history;
exercises in which students show their understanding of how different uses of the comma in the same text can produce different meanings.