

I'll start by exaggerating my claim: if students read their writing aloud, they can get at least 80% of their end-stop punctuation right. To put it more carefully: If students learn to speak their writing aloud with confident care, and listen well, they will get much *closer* to correct punctuation than if they just rely on their knowledge of the rules--no matter whether they know the rules well or badly.

**Illustrative example: *that* / *which***

Consider: *§The concert that is taking place on Saturday is sold out.*

*§The concert, which is taking place on Saturday, is sold out.*

Both versions are correct; there is no clue for choosing one over the other. Yet in most contexts, one will be right and the other one wrong. The rule is difficult, but a careful voicing gives the answer: If you pause, use *which* and commas--if not, use *that* and no commas. I'm not claiming that mistakes with *that* and *which* are life-threatening, but I want to illustrate a profound theoretical point: Many or even most punctuation rules in grammar books are built on rough *approximations* of the author's felt intention or felt meaning. The best window into a writer's felt intention is through intonation. Meaning is in the body.

Students get called illiterate if they make too many punctuation mistakes. Those students who know the rules well are in good shape (though many rules are subtle and actually depend on using the voice and ear). Students who *don't* know the rules can use the voice and ear to get *closer* to correctness. They'll still make mistakes, but the mistakes that come from using the mouth and ear will tend to be less egregious. That is, when students produce writing with terrible punctuation, it's because they didn't trust or listen to their own speech--the punctuation grammar that lives in their bodies. They would have done much better to follow their voices.

But if we want to help students get as close to correctness as possible using voice and ear, we need to give them a bit of training.

**Training the mouth** (and the ear too). Force yourself to say your sentences till you feel that the sound matches the meaning, mirrors the meaning--*is* the meaning. The process won't work if you rush, mumble, or speak timidly. The words have to sound comfortable and right. Every child of four is good at this, and we all do it in our natural conversation, but in a classroom setting, people are often scared to do it.

In mini-workshops I pass out an alleged sentences with no punctuation. I elicit as many different performances of the words as possible. The question is always, "Does that sound okay? Acceptable to the mouth and ear?" (so this rules out nervous monotone mumbblings). I try to push for odd or extreme versions so we can see the limits of acceptability.

**Training the ear.** Learn to hear subtle differences of intonation. Learn in particular to hear the difference between a "letting go" pause (that we render with a period) and a "not-letting-go" (pause that we render with a comma). The crucial point here is that sometimes we pause for a long time but don't let go; and sometimes we don't pause much at all--but nevertheless let go. We've used and responded to these subtle distinctions of intonation since the age of five, but this is *tacit* knowledge, and it takes a bit of training to turn it into explicit conscious knowledge.

**Speakers of Black English or AAVE?** When it comes to the limited realm of the *grammar of punctuation*--that is, where we put pauses and emphases for meaning--I don't *think* we'll find significant differences. But this technique requires students to *trust their own voices*. This can be a problem for students too wounded by the stigmatization of their language. But building trust in your own language is a foundation for good writing.

**Freedom of choice in Punctuation.** Before turning to the rules, let's remember that punctuation isn't all rules. There are *many* situations where we get to decide among various correct options for punctuating a sentence. We get to be like theater- or movie-directors and decide how we want readers

to perform our sentences. In this way, we can help readers *hear* and *feel* our meanings. They won't have to work so hard. Examples of choice in punctuation:

§First\_ it was 9/11\_ then it was the stock market slide\_ and then it was the war in Iraq

§After the turn of the year\_ the stock price began fluctuating\_ more\_ and more wildly

§During the recession\_ the performance began to deteriorate

**Rules and Correctness with Periods and Commas.** This is the main battle ground. When students create too many sentence fragments and comma splices or run-on sentences, they tend to be seen as illiterate and stupid. I've provided a few sample "sentences" for sharpening the voice and ear. I think they illustrate how training in this process will lead students closer to correctness than if they ignore mouth and ear and rely on their limited understanding of the rules. See if you agree that they won't be hammered very hard for the mistakes they do make using this process.

Here some obvious mistakes that students sometimes make--but easily avoid with voice and ear:

§Before we can make a decision. We must wait three weeks.

§After he had waited hours for everyone to leave Jim got annoyed and drove off.

When students go by voice, they accept the following "fragment error" as acceptable:

§The party will re-draw the congressional district. If the incumbent is re-elected.

But notice that it is an "acceptable" fragment--and turns up all the time in nonschool published writing.

And the students *don't* accept the following kind of fragment that sounds stupid and illiterate:

§If the incumbent is re-elected. The party will redraw the congressional district.

Here are "mistakes" the voice can tempt you to make, but they are not disastrous--even arguable:

§The test results were announced yesterday. After students had waited three weeks.

§Pollsters were surprised by her victory, they had forecast low results.

§He wants voters to see what he actually is. That is, a strong independent member of the senate. With a mind of his own.

### **Where Voice and Intonation System Can Lead You Astray**

**Not every pause gets a comma.** There are many places where we pause in speaking--especially for emphasis--but the rules of grammar don't permit a comma:

§The man who got appointed [*no comma*] was dishonest [*Long subject invites pause and "illegal" comma.*]

§ [*Even this sentence shouldn't have a comma*] The man who got appointed two weeks after the deadline had passed [*no comma*] was dishonest

§An effective administrator thinks first [*no comma*] and never lets herself be hurried. [*But students won't get in too much trouble if they use one--and a dash would be fine*]

**Sometimes we *don't* pause--but the rule requires a comma:**

§Most people believed him. However he never told the truth. [*Rules call for comma after "however"*]

### **Three Encouraging Notes**

Even the rule books advise us sometimes to break the rules for clarity (which means to punctuate with the voice. Here's Diana Hacker [*A Writer's Reference* 2nd ed, Bedford 1992 p 154]: "In certain contexts a comma is necessary to prevent confusion." She gives these examples:

§Patients who can, walk up and down the halls several times a day.

§All of the catastrophes that we had feared might happen, happened.

Not many readers know the rules that require commas in the first sentence but not in the second:

§She is a tough, independent, believable executive.

§He created a warm cozy home atmosphere.

But since most readers just use their ears to decide students will seldom get in much trouble for punctuating by voice.

*Dashes* are punctuational wild cards or jokers. They are seldom *wrong*--but if you use too many jokers, your writing will be called careless and informal.