



Punctuation's Rhetorical Effects

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1 PUNCTUATION'S RHETORICAL EFFECTS

Kevin Cassell

OVERVIEW

Many students tend to think of punctuation as governed by a set of rules. This chapter encourages them to conceive of punctuation as a system of conventions, which includes standard expectations of correct usage—certain “rules”—but applies them within a broader rhetorical context. After distinguishing between punctuation and grammar (the two terms are often associated), students are provided with three reading strategies to help them become aware of how punctuation operates in printed texts. The first strategy, explicit reading, adopts *Writing Spaces* author Mike Bunn’s Reading Like a Writer (RLW) approach, but emphasizes a reading style that is sensory. The second strategy, visual reading, asks students to adopt a “typographical perspective” when reading so that they literally *see* how punctuation operates. The third one, aural reading, asks them to *listen* – possibly by reading aloud – to how punctuation conveys an author’s tone of voice, which can help to illustrate context. Palpably experiencing punctuation usage while reading will help students use it with confidence and facility in their own writing.

This chapter accommodates readers with hearing or visual impairments so they may participate in this sensory reading.

I recently shared a few short written expressions with students in my first-year writing class at the University of Arizona.* Each one was a sentence or two long and conveyed a different idea that related to language use. I didn’t tell my students who wrote them. I just projected

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each one on the classroom screen and asked them what they thought. They responded to the ideas of each quite well— until I put this final one up for them to read:

Always's; use the proper name, for thing's. Fear, of a name increase's fear, of the thing, itself.

Not a single student engaged with the *idea* here – that the way something's named can cause people to have an emotional response to it. Instead, they severely critiqued the writing itself. As I had expected, they said the writer had “bad,” “clumsy,” even “horrible” grammar. When I asked for examples of this bad grammar, they said the apostrophes were wrong, the semicolon didn't belong there, and there were too many incorrectly placed commas. I completely agreed with the problems they pointed out – except one.

If you ignore the apostrophes, the semicolon, and the commas, then you'll see that the *grammar* of this two-sentence expression is fine. In fact, the original version had none of those punctuation marks. I put them there after taking it from one of the most popular books in the world – J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. If you've read this book, you may remember the half-blood wizard Professor Dumbledore explaining to young Harry why he calls the villainous Voldermort by his real name and not “the Dark Lord” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” which are terms that undeservedly inflate his status to mythic proportions (298). Here are the actual two sentences before I got my hands on them:

Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.

I incorrectly punctuated these sentences to demonstrate two things. First, I want to point out that there is a difference between grammar and punctuation. Grammar refers to the structure of sentences. If I had changed the *grammar* of the first sentence, it would have come out as *The proper name for things always use or, worse, Things the proper name always use for*. Instead, I just added a number of punctuation marks in places where they didn't belong, which demonstrates my second point: nonstandard use of punctuation not only can confuse or distract readers, it gives them the impression that you can't write well, that you have “bad grammar” even though your sentences may be grammatically sound.

Many of us automatically connect the words *grammar* and *punctuation* because we tend to think of them together. Why is that? I think it goes back to our early school days when we first started to learn how to write in English. We learned that we couldn't arbitrarily string phrases into sen-

tences and sentences into paragraphs on a whim. There were “rules” to follow—and if we didn’t follow the rules, our papers would come back scrawled upon with lots of marks we couldn’t comprehend.

Let’s talk for a moment about these “rules.” You may be surprised to know that many writing instructors, including me, are uncomfortable with this term because it sounds so fixed and rigid. We know that language is fluid and changes when we use it in different situations. Therefore, instead of “rules,” we prefer to use the more flexible word *conventions*, which includes standard expectations of correct usage—certain “rules”—but applies them within a broader context in which authors frequently have options on how and when to use punctuation. In other words, we need to use punctuation effectively, not *just* correctly.

This chapter isn’t going to teach you the right and wrong ways to use punctuation marks. Instead, it’s going to make explicit things we already *know* about punctuation so that we can understand it better and use it with expression and facility. I just punctuated the word “know” using *italics*¹ to stress that, yes, we are all pretty familiar with punctuation simply through our ongoing exposure to written English. All learners of English implicitly acquire this familiarity by reading books, social media posts, posters, road signs, recipes, and even the privacy policies of software products that we download to our computers (yeah, right!). Still, many of us – including native English speakers – need to explicitly learn how punctuation operates. One way to do that is to consult the handbooks and online tutorials where we can read about the standard usage expectations – including “rules” – of punctuation and see correct examples. But there are other ways to learn about punctuation that are not beholden to rules, and this essay is going to show you a couple of them. All you need are these pages you’re reading now and a perceptive reading style that another *Writing Spaces* author, Mike Bunn, calls RLW – “Reading Like a Writer.” In order to help you understand how punctuation operates in written English, I’m going to ask you to adopt an RLW approach that is *sensory* – that is, I want you to both *see* and *hear* how punctuation operates on whatever page you’re reading, including this one. There are three strategies I’m going to go over with you that I think will help you learn how to use punctuation effectively in your own writing:

1. Explicit Learning: We all learn punctuation in two ways: *implicitly* (by being exposed to it whenever we read something in English) and *explicitly* (by consciously becoming aware of how it’s used and

- for what purposes). RLW is a form of explicit learning and the initial strategy upon which the next two are based.
2. **Visual Reading:** This RLW strategy involves *looking at* the typography of a page or screen that you're reading and *seeing* how punctuation structures the meaning and expression of what we read and write. (If you are nonsighted, of course, this kind of visual reading would be accomplished by setting your screen reader – if possible – to call out all the marks of punctuation on the text being transcribed. I'll tell you when to do that.) When we read with such awareness, we learn explicitly things we already have an implicit familiarity with, including certain rules governing punctuation usage.
 3. **Aural Reading:** This RLW strategy involves *hearing* how the prose in a text flows, often by *listening* to the “tone” of an author's voice. Italics, dashes, exclamation points, and even semicolons help express an author's tone – their attitude toward what they're writing about – as well as illustrate the context of the situation being described. Although this strategy can involve reading aloud and listening to how your own voice is shaped by punctuation, listening *imaginatively* – as some hearing-impaired readers or people who identify themselves as Deaf do – also works wonderfully.

These strategies are not meant to replace standard usage expectations of punctuation described in writing handbooks or online tutorials. They're simply ways to enhance your familiarity with how punctuation operates in written English so that you will use it effectively – *and correctly* – when you write your own texts. You can learn a whole lot about punctuation by becoming explicitly conscious of it while reading. My hope is that by doing so you will begin to think of it less as a set of “rules” and more as a system of conventions with considerable flexibility and important rhetorical effects.

STRATEGY 1: LEARNING EXPLICITLY

If you've been writing in formal English for a long time, you probably don't think twice about putting periods at the end of sentences, commas after items in a list, or apostrophes in contractions like “I'm.” You just do it out of habit because you've always done it that way (except perhaps when you're texting or messaging with family or friends). Why is that? In some cases, you were taught these standard usage conventions and have remembered them so well that you don't need to think about them anymore. In other

cases, your repeated exposure to written English – through story books, novels, textbooks, menus, news articles, signs and posters – has allowed you to learn things without realizing you were learning. Cognitive psychologists and educational researchers call our ability to learn without conscious awareness *implicit learning*. By contrast, they define *explicit learning* as when we are consciously aware of what we're learning, like when we memorize grammar rules or times tables (Ellis, 3). Nancy Mann, a composition and rhetorical theorist, has described punctuation as something that “is often learned without teaching and more often than not learned despite much teaching” (359). She claims that punctuation decisions are often made by writers not because of what they've been explicitly taught in school – the “rules” – but because they have acquired an *unconscious* awareness of its structuring principles simply by reading and writing.

Since day one, we've been learning about the world implicitly as well as explicitly. We don't realize the implicit things we're learning, though, until we become conscious of them. This is how it is with punctuation. Rarely do we become explicitly aware of it unless it's really, not working the way it should. When punctuation doesn't pop out and announce itself to readers like it does when it's not properly employed, it's invisible.

That's why it's important for us to make it visible. In his *Writing Spaces* essay “How to Read Like a Writer,” Mike Bunn describes trying to read books while working in a theater with a lot of noise coming from the stage. By focusing intently on the language as he tried to concentrate, he realized that he was no longer reading like most of us read – as *readers*; instead, he was reading like a *writer*, paying close attention to “the interesting ways authors string words into phrases into paragraphs into entire books” (72). In school, we've been taught to read mainly for information and ideas. When we read for these things we default to reading like *readers*. When we read like *writers*, Bunn tells us, we pay attention to the text, to the choices authors make, the “techniques” they employ, which influence how readers respond to their writing (72). What is this author's main idea? What's their² purpose? What facts, descriptions, statistics, and historical accounts do they offer to illustrate or support their purpose or idea? He cites Charles Moran, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, to illustrate what it means to RLW:

When we read like writers we understand and participate in the writing. We see the choices the writer has made, and we see how the writer has coped with the consequences of those choices... We “see” what the writer is doing because we read as writers; we see

because we have written ourselves and know the territory, know the feel of it, know some of the moves ourselves. (qtd. in Bunn, 75)

It's interesting that Moran uses the verb *see* several times in this passage – even “quoting” it for emphasis – to illustrate the act of reading like writers. While Moran's seemingly *sensory* approach to reading is more figurative than literal, he's clearly advocating developing habits designed to make us explicitly learn what we already implicitly “know the feel of.” Let's literally apply Moran's reading-as-seeing metaphor by explicitly *looking* at the texts we read and *seeing* how punctuation functions in them. I call this next strategy “visual reading.”

STRATEGY 2: VISUAL READING

This RLW strategy isn't hard to do, but it can take a little getting used to. Reading visually is something we do all the time. For example, at the beginning of this essay I described a moment in a *Harry Potter* novel when the half-blood wizard Professor Dumbledore explains to young Harry why he calls the villainous Voldermort by his real name and not “the Dark Lord.” Even if you have never read a single *Harry Potter* book or seen any of the movie adaptations, when you read my brief description, did you not picture in your mind a smart, wizard-like man giving advice to a young boy about some mean-looking antagonist? If so, then you were in a sense reading visually; the words “wizard,” “professor,” “young Harry,” “villainous,” and “Dark Lord” helped paint a picture of a situation involving three different characters. This kind of visual reading, though, is imaginative; we see the situation with our *minds*, not our actual eyes. In order to “see” how punctuation operates in written English, we need to look at it with our eyes. If, however, we are nonsighted or visually impaired (I am actually blind in one eye), then we need to imaginatively “see” the punctuation using a screen reader.

We seldom pay attention to the important ways punctuation shapes our reading of a text because few of us have been encouraged to adopt what composition theorist John Trimbur calls a “typographical perspective.” Typography is the appearance and style of printed language. Trimbur points out that essay writing has long been taught as a “process” in which “the page itself is of little account.” “As readers,” he points out, “we are supposedly not looking at the visual design but following the writer's thoughts” (367). When reading for information, we seldom register what our eyes are actually *seeing*: that “writing is a visible language that is produced and

circulated in material forms” (363) like the page you’re reading / looking at / seeing right now. When we visually read the typography, we begin to see things that we often take for granted. Punctuation is one of them.

While we may not be accustomed to reading with an explicit awareness of a text’s typography, we all do it occasionally. Have you ever had to write a research paper using MLA citation style? If so, you’ve probably looked at a sample Works Cited page to see how it’s set up. You saw, for example, that when citing an article from an academic journal you put the “article’s title in quotation marks” and the *journal’s title in italics*. You *looked* at the format, *saw* the conventions, and then did the same thing for your own Works Cited page. That’s an example of visually reading the typography of a text. With this in mind, I’m now going to ask you to do something kind of strange. You’ve probably never been asked to do this before, and it may take a moment or two to get used to it. But here goes. When you get to the end of this paragraph, come back and read it again *visually*, from a typographical perspective, so that you “see” the punctuation. With this explicit awareness in mind, think about the purpose or effect of each mark. Are you ready? If so, open your eyes wide (or set your screen reader to call out all the punctuation marks). OK, let’s do it. Ready. Get set . . . *Go!*

In the paragraph above, you “saw” ten different marks of punctuation. Some of them I had to use to meet standard usage expectations: periods to end sentences, apostrophes to make contractions or show possession, question marks to indicate questions, and commas to set apart clauses. Other punctuation marks I used – like the em dash, exclamation points, italics, ellipses, quotation marks to create emphasis, and even the parentheses—were optional, *rhetorical choices* I made to emphasize certain things and give my writing a colloquial style. I chose to use an ellipses (. . .) before the italicized exclamation *Go!* in order to create a slight pause and give dramatic effect to the assigned task. I could have used an em dash (Get set – *Go!*) or just a period (Get set. *Go!*), but I know from my own RLW experience that the ellipses is sometimes used to indicate a pause, and I wanted you to get a sense of anticipation, kind of like track runners feel when they’re all lined up waiting for the start to a race.

I also know from my own RLW experience that my version of the ellipses is used primarily in informally written texts where readers are supposed to get a sense of the author’s personality or attitude toward what they’re writing about. Writing informally is another thing I and other *Writing Space* authors do with the hope that you, our student audience, will become engaged by silently listening to our voices as you read. Our writing often “sounds like” we’re speaking. And punctuation plays a big

role in conveying the tone – be it informal or formal – of an author’s voice. Let’s turn now to how punctuation can help our writing *sound*.

STRATEGY 3. AURAL READING

The word *aural* refers to the sense of hearing and, hence, the act of listening. The writing scholar Wendy Bishop tells us that “[i]f all our sentences, all our prose, followed ‘the rules’ . . . we’d lose something. We’d be bored to death. We wouldn’t ‘hear’ much from texts.” She advocates having a “flexible sentence strategy” that is shaped less by our concern with rules than with a desire “to create what we call style—your own best way of saying” (121-22). It’s interesting how Bishop describes one’s writing style as a way of “saying.” A sensory RLW approach involves more than looking at and seeing the elements of a printed text; it involves *listening* to the prose made up of those words as we read. We hear what the writer “says” while reading what they’ve written.

In addition to contributing to the flow and rhythm of a text, punctuation plays an important role in conveying an author’s voice. Voice is a rhetorical convention in multiple genres – blogs, news articles, opinion pieces, business letters, novels, poems, how-to guides, and, of course, essays. When we hear the term *voice* we immediately think of spoken articulation. But writing has voice too, and often that voice has a particular tone. As you read this chapter, can you hear my voice? If so, you’ll notice that, like others in *Writing Spaces*, it has an informal tone. I use contractions (*it’s*, *don’t*) and personal pronouns (*I*, *you*, *we*) in an attempt to convey the impression that I’m talking to you. My purpose is to share with you, my audience, my belief that punctuation matters more than we realize, and part of my rhetorical strategy is to write in a way that personalizes your reading of my essay. If my voice is friendly, conversational, and even a little passionate about (*drumroll, please!*) punctuation, then hopefully you’ll keep reading and come to share my view. And as you can see with your own typographically trained eyes, I draw from a battery of punctuation marks to help me out.

I began this chapter with a two-sentence expression that was so poorly punctuated it distracted people from engaging with the meaning. If you go back and read it again, you’ll realize that it’s almost impossible to read aloud. Because we couldn’t really hear what it was saying, it failed to create a context – convey meaning – that we could relate to our own experiences. Let’s bring this chapter to a close with another two-sentence expression, but this time I’m going to punctuate the sentences correctly, but in

different ways, to demonstrate how punctuation gives a tone of voice to writing. As the punctuation changes, so too does the tone and, along with that, the context of each sentence. When he wrote “How to Read Like A Writer,” Mike Bunn asked former students for feedback about how to read effectively in the writing class. One student said it was important to have a “context” for the text you’re reading (76). Often that means identifying the author’s purpose and intended audience. But context can often be discerned by listening to their tone of voice and identifying their attitude toward the subject or situation being described. As you will see, even though the words remain the same, the punctuation conveys a very different tone and context for a certain situation.

First, let’s begin with no punctuation whatsoever. Here is the two-sentence expression:

they didnt mislead they flat out lied

If the author has an attitude here, it’s hard to hear because something essential – punctuation – is missing. It may work as a text message where the writers know the context of what’s being discussed, but here it’s just messy writing on a page. Let’s meet the expectations of readers by putting in some standard punctuation marks. Here’s the first version, which I’ll call expression A:

They didn’t mislead. They flat-out lied.

After capitalizing the first word of each sentence, I put the required apostrophe in the contraction “don’t,” two periods at the end of both sentences, and a hyphen in the compound adverb “flat-out” (when two words are joined to modify a noun or verb, we connect them with a hyphen). Now that the writing doesn’t distract by violating any “rules,” I can better hear the writer’s voice. It’s informal. I can tell by their use of “flat-out” – which is a colloquial, somewhat slangy term meaning *blatantly, purposely, without hesitation* – and their use of the contraction “don’t,” the informal version of “do not.” In addition, the tone of voice provides a little context to the situation being described here. The author seems to be directly stating a fact: They didn’t do this. They did that. Period. When I read it aloud and listen to my own voice, it sounds relatively informal but also kind of “factual.” There may be a little bias by the author toward the situation here, but the limited punctuation doesn’t emphasize it that much.

Now let’s listen to how the tone of voice changes when we punctuate this expression differently. First, please visually read the following two expressions from a typographical perspective (or set your screen reader to call

out the punctuation marks), seeing how the punctuation marks help to give each one a distinct context. Then, with each context in mind, aurally read it – aloud if possible, or imaginatively with your inner voice – and listen to how your own voice changes to express the differences:

B. They didn't mislead? They flat-out. . . lied?

C. They didn't "mislead." They flat-out *lied*.

The context implied by expression **B** is quite different from expression **A** that we just read. In expression **B**, the writer seems to be surprised by the news that this group of people lied, which is a more egregious act than simply misleading. The ellipses (. . .) gives me the impression that the harsh truth of the matter is slowly dawning on the writer. I therefore aurally read **B** with a naïve and incredulous tone of voice that lilted upwards (which English speakers tend to do when asking questions) and then paused – with a little shudder even – before uttering that fatal final word. The punctuation of expression **C**, on the other hand, gives me the impression that the writer knows precisely what this unethical group of people did. The quotation marks suggest that this group actually used the word “mislead” to diminish the severity of their dishonesty. The author “quotes” their misleading use of “mislead” and then emphasizes that dishonesty by italicizing the word *lied*. Unlike expressions **A** and (especially) **B**, I get the impression of a pretty strong bias here, and so I read aloud **C** with a sarcastic tone of voice, emphasizing the quoted term “mislead” and emphasizing even more strongly the italicized term *lied*.

Do you see how punctuation, by conveying the tone of an author's voice, can also illustrate the context of a situation being described? Although expressions **A**, **B**, and **C** have the same basic structure and describe a specific situation, the punctuation provides us with different ways of perceiving that situation. Interesting, huh? Just don't lose sight of the fact that the punctuation in all three expressions is correctly employed so as not to break any rules and distract readers.

FINAL WORDS

As you can see, we can actually learn a lot about writing simply by paying explicit attention to those inconspicuous punctuation marks we're accustomed to gliding over as we read. Sometimes we can even learn the rules themselves, though it's always a good idea to double-check our assumptions with reference to a trustworthy source. Ultimately, though, we should care

about punctuation not because of the rules but because of our readers. Writing that's well punctuated is more than just "correct." It's readable, informative, and often even engaging. In short, it's rhetorically effective.

QUESTIONS

1. This chapter encourages you to read both visually and aurally so that you *see* and *hear* how punctuation functions in writing. Is this kind of reading something that comes easily to you, or do you have to work at it? Do you think it's possible to read for entertainment or information at the same time that you are paying attention to the look and sound of writing?
2. Some writers who "listen" to writing acknowledge the role punctuation plays in making texts appeal to the ear. Theodor Adorno, a 20th century philosopher, compared punctuation to music (300). The writer Lynn Truss claims that "punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play" (20). What do you think about this analogy? What else might you compare punctuation to, and why?
3. In this chapter, the author re-punctuated a two-sentence expression ("They didn't mislead. They flat-out lied.") three ways. A famous philosopher, Rene Descartes, summed up his thinking with a famous axiom "*I think, therefore I am.*" (His original phrase, in Latin, is "*cogito, ergo sum.*") Go online and find out what "*I think, therefore I am*" means philosophically, then think (or talk with your peers) about how the single comma used in the original translation helps to express that idea. Afterwards, re-punctuate this expression in three or four ways so that it has three distinctly different voices and contexts. What would be the "philosophy" of each expression? Have fun with this one.

NOTES

1. In "How to Teach Punctuation," Ralph H. Singleton argues that italics is one of several devices that ought to be taught along with punctuation, since their purpose and use are the same (112). In this chapter I treat italics as a form of punctuation.

2. Do you wonder if I made a mistake here? Should I have used "he or she" for "the author," which is singular, instead of "they"? In this instance, I'm using what's called the "singular *they*." The singular *they* is used in common expressions

like “Somebody left their credit card on the restaurant table.” Not only is it less cumbersome than “he or she,” it’s also a gender-neutral term that respectfully includes people who do not identify as either male or female. For these reasons, I use the singular *they* throughout this essay (More here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they).

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR PUNCTUATION'S RHETORICAL EFFECTS BY KEVIN CASSELL

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Punctuation, along with grammar, has long been conceived of in Composition and Writing Studies as a Lower Order Concern. It is not unusual for college and university students to complete two semesters of first year writing without attending to punctuation in any meaningful way. Primarily this oversight – if it can be called that – is a result of the disciplinary privileging of process over product. We all know that knowledge of how to use semicolons and commas effectively is negligible if a writer doesn't have something worth punctuating in the first place. Hence we spend what precious little class time we have with our students focusing on Higher Order Concerns: developing a thesis or claim, writing with a central purpose for a target audience, organizing ideas and information, drafting and revising. We know that punctuation matters – after all, when we ourselves write essays and reports and emails and syllabi, we're generally pretty meticulous about how we use it. But as teachers, we don't have the time to cover the exhaustive number of standard usage expectations, the “rules” governing punctuation, that we've learned over time. That's why so many of us supplement our primary textbooks with writing handbooks (or link to online sites like Purdue Owl), which more often than not are used as a “reference” for students to consult on their own, usually during the editing stage of final drafts.

This essay offers an approach to punctuation that is not based on “rules.” It doesn't tell students how to use punctuation correctly. Instead, it encourages them to become explicitly aware of punctuation as they read by *seeing* and *hearing* it, and ultimately *understanding* how it's employed for what purposes. Standard usage expectations or “rules” are just one way of learning punctuation; reading with an awareness of how those marks (, : “ ? ; b ‘ i –) operate in standard written English across multiple genres is a significant first step to learning punctuation – and many of us, I think, have learned usage in this manner. Yes, we need to know certain usage rules, but these can often be discerned (and sometimes implicitly learned) from reading with an awareness of punctuation as a textual feature that shapes phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing handbooks, online tutorials and guides are not the only way for students to become familiar with punctuation usage.

I introduce punctuation in my FYW courses early in the semester. I don't discuss it solely in terms of editing and proofreading final drafts for the sake of correctness. Instead, I point out that it is a material and rhetorical element in the texts they read and plays a role in their reception of those texts. As shown in my essay, I distinguish between punctuation usage that is "required" (apostrophes to show contractions or possession, question marks for questions, periods to end sentences) and usage that is more flexible and oftentimes rhetorical (parentheses or em dashes, italics or bold, ellipses). I introduce students to the strategy of explicit reading, which I associate in my chapter, following Charles Moran and Mike Bunn, with "reading like a writer" (RLW). I bring up punctuation throughout the course, when appropriate, and often in relation to Higher Order Concerns like purpose, context, and especially audience. For example, when reading an essay – like a *Writing Spaces* chapter – I'll ask students to choose a particular paragraph where the author makes a salient point or just says something memorable. After discussing that point in relation to the essay's purpose, I'll ask them to consider *how* that point or memorable statement is conveyed. This leads inevitably to the text of that paragraph and the sentences, words, and – yes – punctuation marks that compose it. Sometimes that punctuation supports an "aural" representation of an author's voice (like my use of two em dashes around the word "yes" in the previous sentence), which provides an occasion to consider how audience awareness informs certain choices the author makes during the writing process that are sometimes supported punctuationally.

I have emphasized multimodal reading strategies – reading as "seeing" and "hearing" especially – for some years now. (I don't use the term multimodal in my chapter; I use the more common term "sensory.") I believe that this style of reading, because it makes students conscious of how language functions as writing, helps them develop as writers. While I don't eschew "rules," "guidelines," and "best practices," I believe that one of the best ways to learn how to write is to read with an awareness of writing – to read like a writer. With the exception of some text messages perhaps, punctuation is something we encounter every time we read across all genres. Because we tend to read for information and ideas, however, punctuation tends to slip out of sight. The 20th century thinker Theodor Adorno called punctuation "inconspicuous." What I try to do is have it visually and aurally register with the eyes and ears of readers so that it is less inconspicuous. I believe that being mindful of, first, the material existence of punctuation in writing, and second, of its effective employment will help students use it with confidence and facility in their own writing.

ACTIVITIES

1. Have students choose one punctuation mark that they feel they don't know as well as they'd like to. Have students go online or look in their writing handbook at how this mark is used, then share that usage skill with others.
2. Have students pair up. Working separately, ask them to find a short paragraph from an essay, article, or book that has a variety of punctuation marks in it. Have them write that paragraph down on a piece of paper, taking out all of the punctuation marks. Student pairs should exchange paragraphs and be instructed to punctuate their partner's paragraph. Ask students to compare the original with their punctuated paragraph, seeing how close both students came to the original, and have students discuss why they chose some of the marks they did.