Practical Punctuation
Praise for Practical Punctuation

Practical Punctuation is the thinking child’s (and teacher’s) guide to punctuation! Gone are endless drills and meaningless exercises that lead to little or no application in children’s writing. Dan argues for one focused punctuation study per grade, giving students a year’s worth of writing to apply what they’ve learned. When you consider this approach you’ll wonder how you ever taught another way. Dan’s think-aloud lesson suggestions make vividly clear how teachers can encourage students to experiment with punctuation to varied effect.

The particular delight of this book comes in the insights of great writers—Frank McCourt, Jimmy Breslin, Natalie Babbitt, Colum McCann—that pepper its pages. These writers afford teachers a real-world view of the power of punctuation in creating meaning. The unrelenting focus throughout this beautifully crafted book is on meaning. Dan shows how writers wield punctuation in the way that an artist varies the size and type of her brushes and strokes—all in the service of meaning.

In all the books I’ve read about written language, Dan is the first to explore the mind’s ear. His delicious investigation of how punctuation can “heighten the awareness of rhythm and melody in our own writing” has actually changed the way I read as well as write. How lucky we are to (finally) have an intellectually engaging exploration of what we have too long considered drudgery.

—Ellin Oliver Keene, coauthor of Mosaic of Thought
Lessons on Rule Making and Rule Breaking in Elementary Writing

DAN FEIGELSON

Foreword by Carl Anderson
To Sonia, my daughter

and my father Charles

the two who taught me the importance

of listening to children
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Several years ago, when Dan Feigelson was principal at PS 6 in Manhattan, I worked as a staff developer in his school. At the end of the last day of my residency, Dan suggested we have a glass of wine at Bemelmans Bar in the Carlyle Hotel, which was a few blocks away on Madison Avenue.

As we walked into Bemelmans, Dan pointed out the murals of whimsical animals that decorate its walls. “Guess who painted them,” he said. I looked closely and knew they looked familiar, but I couldn’t place the artist. “I’ll give you a hint,” Dan said, pointing to the group of figures on one wall. I walked over and saw... twelve little girls, in two straight lines... and the smallest one was Madeline! “Ludwig Bemelmans is the artist,” I said—the author and illustrator of the *Madeline* books (and former resident of the Carlyle Hotel).

Spend time with Dan Feigelson, and you find out he knows details about New York City that most people don’t. Where you and I might blithely pass by Bemelmans Bar without knowing that the artwork of a beloved children’s author adorned its walls, Dan has made it his business to know these things.

And if you spend time with Dan Feigelson, you’ll also find out he knows and values things about teaching writing that many of us do not—yet. Teaching children how to use punctuation wisely and have fun doing so—the subject of Dan’s new book—is something many of us don’t know much about. Nor do many of us even consider punctuation worthy of extended instructional time in a writing workshop. Dan has made it his business to delve into this topic, and we are all the wiser for the impressive and exciting writing about the subject that he has done in this book.

In *Practical Punctuation*, Dan Feigelson teaches us that punctuation doesn’t have to be the dry, boring subject many of us found it to be when we were youngsters. Instead, as Dan writes, punctuation is a tool that writers use to clarify and enhance the meaning they want to get across. Teach punctuation well—and you’ll discover how to do exactly that in these pages—and your students become “punctuation zealots,” kids who are fascinated by punctuation marks and their many uses, kids who develop new powers as writers because of their newfound knowledge of punctuation.

*Practical Punctuation* is, above all, a practical book. Inside you’ll find units of study for students in different grades, with detailed lessons that specify exactly how to teach students about punctuation. For students in the primary grades, Dan provides a study of end marks (periods, question marks, exclamation marks, and the ellipsis). For students in the middle elementary grades, he unpacks a study of the comma. And for students in the upper elementary grades, he presents a thrilling “cadence study,” which involves teaching students how punctuation influences the way writing sounds and shades the meaning of a text. Each unit has been field-tested.
in real classrooms by experienced teachers, so you can be confident they’ll help your students learn to use punctuation not only with purpose, but with joy.

While writing *Practical Punctuation*, Dan Feigelson interviewed award-winning writers—Frank McCourt and Jimmy Breslin among them—about their use of punctuation. These writers have fascinating things to say about punctuation. Clearly, they’ve given it a lot of thought in the course of drafting their books and articles. Expertly woven throughout, the writers’ quotes punctuate Dan’s book. As you read along, you begin to anticipate the next writers’ insight; they enhance the meaning of the text.

Why teach students to be punctuation zealots? Dan’s book gives us many good reasons, and one of the most convincing is this: the writers we revere are punctuation zealots themselves.

Of course, Dan is one, too. He’s told me that whenever he revises his work he reads his writing aloud and taps a pencil in order to gauge the cadence of his sentences. He’ll show you how to teach kids to do that in Chapter 4.

You should also know that Dan is an experienced and passionate educator. Over more than two decades in education, he’s been a teacher, researcher, staff developer, curriculum designer, and principal. Now he leads a network of twenty diverse schools in New York City, a position comparable to that of superintendent in other places. The work that Dan discusses in *Practical Punctuation* rings true because it’s written by someone who knows kids, knows classrooms, knows curriculum, and who knows schools.

Today, when I pass Bemelmans Bar, I always think about the paintings inside. Sometimes I stop by to gaze at them for a while. After you read *Practical Punctuation*, you’ll notice punctuation more in what you read, and you’ll probably stop sometimes to admire the way writers use it. So, too, will your students, as they become writers who are fascinated by punctuation and use it to communicate what they have to say clearly and powerfully.

Carl Anderson
As they learn to read, small children notice all sorts of things about print. From different letters to different fonts to words all in caps to familiar chunks of words, everything seems there for a reason. Before they are explicitly taught about ending punctuation, our youngest readers wonder what those dots are doing at the end of the line.

The purpose of an early grade punctuation inquiry is to harness young children’s natural curiosity. This mini-unit, adapted from master first grade teacher and literacy coach Barbara Pinto, begins by asking students to think about how periods help us as readers. From there they investigate the different types of ending punctuation (period, exclamation point, question mark, ellipses) and experiment with them in their writing. Throughout the inquiry children are given opportunities to:

- Form theories about what each type of ending punctuation does.
- Reflect on the ending punctuation choices authors make and why.
- Explain their own ending punctuation choices.

Though it is presented in three parts, the study should last a minimum of a week. It may take a couple of days for the class to read through a text and form theories about the author’s ending punctuation (Lesson 2). Certainly students will need more than one writing period to experiment with and explain their own ending punctuation choices. For writers who already have a basic knowledge of periods, Lesson 1 may be skipped entirely. Adaptations are encouraged depending on the needs, strengths, struggles, and interests of a particular group of students.

**Materials/Teacher:**

- A passage (from a familiar picture book, piece of shared writing, morning message, or your own writing) with all periods removed, copied onto chart paper or an overhead transparency.
- The same passage, with periods included.
- Chart paper and markers, to record children’s ideas about periods.

**Materials/Students:**

- Book baggies with just-right texts, one for each child.
- Writing folders, paper, pencils.
Summary

The class will examine a familiar text (from a picture book, piece of shared writing, morning message, or your writing) in two different versions. First, students will see and hear it read aloud with no periods at all and notice how difficult it is to read. Then, they will see and hear it in the original version, fully punctuated, and discuss how the periods helped it make sense. Last, children will go off to write, explaining their own decisions of when to use periods.

Sample Language/Sequence

“Our class has been noticing so many interesting things about how authors write their words,” you might begin. “Today we are going to think about some of the other marks, besides the letters, that they use to help readers understand.” Using an exaggeratedly rushed and breathless voice, read aloud the passage with no periods. The idea is to bring out how the text makes little sense without any pauses or breaths.

Today is Monday. It is a little cold outside. We will go to art today and try out some new paints. It may get pretty messy. There is pizza for lunch. This is our favorite. We will try not to eat too much and get sick.

You might end with a dramatic touch, wiping your brow or falling off your chair in mock exhaustion. “Wow!” you might continue, “I am out of breath after reading that. Turn and talk to your partner about how we could make this writing easier to read.”

As students have brief conversations (one or two minutes), listen in and choose comments to share with the group. “Ayana and Susannah said it was confusing to listen to that morning message, since one thing went right into the next. Jorge and Jeanene said it would be better if there were some breaths so we could hear each thing one at a time. Now let’s look at the same morning message a different way and see what we notice about how it has changed.”

Today is Monday. It is a little cold outside. We will go to art today and try out some new paints. It may get pretty messy. There is pizza for lunch. This is our favorite. We will try not to eat too much and get sick.

As you read the version with periods included, slow down and emphasize the pauses without overdoing it. Though the first reading was exaggeratedly rushed, this one should be as natural as possible. Once students have had time to hear and look at the text, again ask them briefly to discuss with a partner what they have noticed. Listen in, identifying children who have come up with the particular ideas you want to bring out in the class conversation. By the end of the lesson students should be aware that the dots at the end of the sentence:

• Create pauses and let us breathe.
• Make the writing easier to understand.
• Separate one idea from another.
• Are called periods.
After listening to their observations, open up the conversation to the larger group. Circle the periods at the end of the sentences as students point them out, and record their ideas on a chart that will remain on display. If the above notions don’t come out in the conversation, pose questions that will push children’s thinking in the right direction.

Also emphasize that writers make choices about where to put periods, and give examples of how they make their decisions. “When I was writing about trying out the new paints in art class,” you might explain, “I thought it would make people laugh if I talked about how it could get messy. Since I wanted the reader to notice that part, I put a period just before it. That way you read it right after taking a breath, and it feels especially important.”

After discussing and charting some of the reasons authors use periods, give students the opportunity to try using them in their own writing. “When you go off to write, think about when you should be using those dots—periods—in your own writing. When is it important to separate one thing from another? Are there any parts where people will be confused if you don’t help them by putting in a period? As you work I will be coming around to talk to you about your period decisions.”

**Independent Work**

When children begin to try out punctuation in their own writing, don’t be too concerned whether they are using it correctly. This will come in time, and in the case of periods it is sure to happen quickly. It is more important to convey the idea that all punctuation is something writers make choices about. Though ending punctuation is certainly more rule bound than other sorts, an author chooses when to write a sentence ending in an exclamation point, when to lead with a question, and when to go with the period. Experienced authors know to use exclamation points and question marks in moderation, but young children need to understand that even something as mandatory as ending punctuation involves thinking about how we want the reader to understand our writing.

Questions and suggestions to pose to children as you confer with them during independent writing may include:

- Where is a place you really want your reader to notice something important? How can a period help show that part is special?
- Tell me a list of the things that happen in your story. Is each thing separated with a period? Why or why not?
- How are you deciding when to use periods in your story? Tell me about one place you decided to use one. Tell me about one place you decided not to use one.

Keep records of your conferences, and note suggestions for things children can try in their writing. In order to highlight the notion that periods are something an author makes decisions about, identify two or three students who are particularly articulate about their use of periods, so you can call on them during the class share.
Share Session

Using what students have told you in conferences, choose a particular focus for the share. Points to bring out might include using periods to:

- Separate ideas that would be confusing if they were all together.
- Make a reader pay special attention to a certain part.
- Show where to take a breath after you are done telling about one thing.

Whatever the focus, frame it by clearly repeating back to students what they “can all learn from the writer(s) that shared today.”

Possible Follow-Up Activities

Students may speak to their partner about the way authors have used periods in the books they are reading independently. When are they using them to separate different parts of the story? When are they there to bring out something special? You might have a special share session in which children show examples of how periods are used in their favorite books.
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