

Which Comes First, the *Comma* or the *Pause*?

**Core Lessons for Motivating Students to
Write Effectively**

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If you asked your students their main reason for placing a comma in a sentence, what answer would the majority give?



Pause?



Your students are not alone in using
the “*pause rule.*”

In 2001, Bank One gave 640 managers
and supervisors a writing
assessment.

Approximately *60 percent* scored
below 70 percent on grammar and
punctuation skills.



When asked how they decided where to place a comma in a sentence, *almost 100 percent* responded that they looked for *pauses*.



But there ain't no
pause
rule!



Without doubt, the most amazing fact about commas is that they are placed based on *comma rules* rather than *pauses*.



The irony is, in the process of learning comma rules, natural breaks in grammar become clear.

Therefore, “looking for pauses” becomes relevant once again—but this time, from an *educated perspective*.



But there are other reasons . . .

Do you find that some of your students can write an essay *but they cannot write a sentence?*

Would it also be fair to say that some students have *Editor's Block?*

PS Ask your students to define what a sentence is—you may be surprised.



Editor's Block: The inability to proofread or edit a document because the writer does not know how to identify errors and correct them.

When students base their writing decisions on **guesses**, their first draft is not much different from their final draft.



Learning punctuation is a critical step in learning how to proofread and edit.

That's because students learn about the **sentence core as they learn punctuation rules.**



In fact, not knowing the sentence core is a serious *learning gap*.



The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

1. Knowing
2. Comprehending
- 3. Applying**
4. Analyzing
5. Synthesizing
6. Evaluating



Once students understand the sentence core . . .

- **Subject-verb agreement makes sense.**
- **Fragments and run-ons are no longer threats.**
- **Teacher comments become meaningful.**
- **Students begin to understand grammar *for* writing.**



The Sentence Core Links Grammar to Writing Style

Understanding the sentence core is the first step in making effective editing decisions:

- **Choosing active voice or passive voice**
- **Using real subjects and strong verbs**
- **Using subjective and objective pronouns correctly**
- **Applying parallel structure**
- **Being concise**



So the question becomes, what is involved in teaching *punctuation from the core*?



Here's how the process works.

- Students analyze sentences rather than relearn the basics.
- Teachers and students acquire a common vocabulary for punctuation rules.
- Students identify the verb first and then the subject of each practice sentence.
- Students identify the comma rule that applies:
When in doubt, leave the comma out!



Punctuating from the Core helps ensure transfer of learning.

- Students acquire a *system* for making punctuation decisions, which enhances writing across the curriculum.
- Cross training exercises with non-writing teachers becomes accessible and even fun.



The method is foolproof . . .

- Give a pretest (about 5 minutes).
- Toss out all security blankets.
- Endure the pain of learning *conjunctions*.
- Integrate higher level thinking into the activity: expect students to analyze “the why” behind their decisions.

But does it get results?



Two Class Profiles*

Indiana University Northwest

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Improvement</u>
Group 1			
AVERAGE (10 students)	36	64	28 pts. / 74%
Group 2			
AVERAGE 60% (14 students)	44	70	26 pts. /

*The primary focus of each class was writing, *not grammar*.



More Results . . .

- In their writing skills program, participants from Bank One spent *less than two hours* on basic comma and semicolon rules.
- During the remainder of their 12-hour program, they worked on grammar, style, and editing.
- For one typical class, the post-test assessment averaged *90 percent*, which equated to a *52 percent improvement*.



Punctuating from the Core

**If it's that much fun,
let's try it for ourselves!**

