



MINISTRY OF STORIES

Playing Punctuation

The perils of poor punctuation have already been showcased by the book 'Eats, shoots and leaves' and the band 'Let's eat Grandma!'. In this lesson, children use drama to demonstrate the impact of punctuation choices in sentences.

1. Understanding the sentences

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Give each group a pair of sentences. The first challenge for the group is to discuss the sentences, working out the differences between the meanings.

For example: 'Let's eat, Grandma!' is someone suggesting that their grandmother joins them for food, but 'Let's eat Grandma!' implies that Granny will be on the menu tonight!

2. Developing the drama

Once the group have worked out the difference between the sentences, they develop two sketches - each mini-play demonstrating a different interpretation.

Hint: it can be helpful for the two plays to be very similar, with the only difference being the one suggested by the sentence punctuation

For example: 'Let's eat, Grandma!' could have a family sitting around a table miming eating, calling a child acting as a grandmother to walk over; 'Let's eat Grandma!' could be exactly the same, but with the grandmother actor sitting on the table, looking very worried...

3. Lights, camera and...

When a group perform, display an unpunctuated version of the sentence on your board.

After each performance, ask the class what happened in each scenario, then elicit the different punctuation used in each sentence. If you're using PowerPoint, use the pen function (when viewing as a presentation, right click and select 'Pointer Options'>'Pen') to mark out the different versions.

Extra challenge: Give the children only one version of the sentence and see if they can work out an alternatively-punctuated version

Extra spicy challenge: Can children come up with their own ambiguous sentences to punctuate? They will probably start off by emulating existing examples.

Next lesson suggestion: use selected examples from the plays to illustrate or introduce different grammatical concepts:

For example:

- Subordinate clauses: 'When you're on the road in the countryside,...'
- Adverbials: '...hunted lions, with a tranquilizer gun.'
- Prepositional phrases: 'in the woods.'
- Commas in lists: 'When you're out on the road in the countryside, watch out for speeding cows and sheep.'
- Avoiding commas between a verb and its object: 'I like cooking, my mum and my dog.'
- Oxford comma: 'We invited the aliens, Beyonce and Jay-Z.'
- Indirect vs direct speech: 'The naughty boy said his class teacher had been throwing paper at the headteacher.'
- Words taking on different word classes depending on the sentence: stealing in 'No stealing criminals will be arrested'
- Restrictive vs non-restrictive phrases or clauses: 'The zookeeper hunted lions, with a tranquilizer gun.'