Academic writing: Is there such a thing as ‘university-level’ punctuation?

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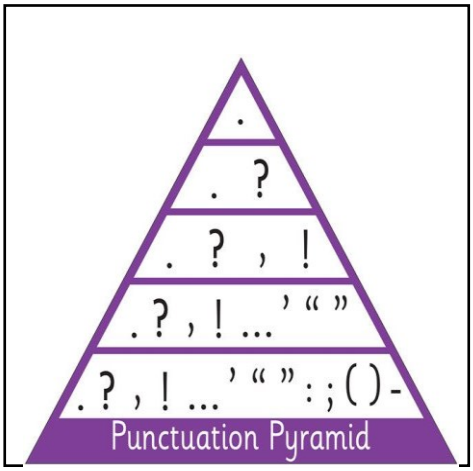
Abstract

This opinion piece makes connections between common strategies currently being deployed in primary schools and a growing perception amongst lecturers that a significant minority of undergraduate students have difficulty with punctuation, a difficulty which can render their written submissions very hard to read. This piece offers possible explanation, citing the ‘punctuation pyramid’ and considering the long-term effects of a primary education policy that encourages primary-aged children to ‘up-level’ their writing, a practice which many students bring to their undergraduate studies.

Keywords: Punctuation, up-levelling, adult literacy, primary education policy

Introduction

While marking written submissions at a range of levels, all lecturers, tutors and supervisors across higher education will at some point, I am sure, have experienced a tension. The content of the work being marked is sound (insightful, even), but the sentence construction is very weak and thus, in the mind of the marker, arises the inevitable question: ‘Can this submission attract a pass grade?’ Often, the source of the problem is either a lack of punctuation or – more commonly – the misuse of punctuation. This article argues that a factor contributing to this malaise is the direct, if unintended, long-term consequence of a particular aspect of primary education practice: the ‘punctuation pyramid’.



Despite a long and diligent search, I have found no person or body claiming copyright over this pyramid, but it is a prominent addition to any primary school classroom: many versions of it are available, each visually different, but all identical in content. The pyramid presents a cumulative hierarchy of punctuation, which children are encouraged to master. It functions like Wilson’s (2009) Criterion Scale, which was a method of assessing children’s writing in accordance with criteria-referenced levels, though Wilson’s original scale included much broader aspects of writing than punctuation alone. In primary schools today, children are encouraged to refer to the punctuation pyramid, both to see the progress they are making in their punctuation journey and, by choosing to insert into their completed first draft alternative or additional punctuation from higher up the pyramid, to ‘up-level’ their work. In visual form, the punctuation pyramid compellingly announces that (for example) a hyphen is two levels 'better' than a comma; that brackets are more advanced than speech marks. The ambitious writer will therefore be inclined to replace one with the other, often unaware of the effect that that might have on meaning.

Various pyramids dealing with different aspects of writing are available to primary school children. McDonald (2016) critiques the current policy, openly applied in many primary schools which requires children, after they have written a sentence or paragraph, to up-level their writing, perhaps by using words deemed to be more powerful than the ones they originally selected. Pyramids are often provided to help children (triangles populated with words or examples, very simple at the top, moving to examples of greater complexity and ambition further down), with the intention of raising writing scores (Barrett, 2014). McDonald argues that this policy leads directly to "a reductionist approach to language whereby the actual meaning of the sentence is secondary to the technical feature being used" (McDonald, 2016: 19). McDonald gives the example of the sentence '*The cat sat on the mat.'*, which, up-levelled, might become: '*The cat slept quietly on the mat.'*, a sentence which has had its meaning changed in the interests of more powerful, yet contextually inappropriate, vocabulary.

McDonald (2016) thus makes the point that children are taught to use powerful or premiership vocabulary almost arbitrarily in order to 'improve' their writing. This opinion piece argues that the same kind of teaching approach, applied to punctuation, can lead directly to indiscriminate use of 'premiere' punctuation, for effect.

Punctuation and meaning

The misuse or non-use of punctuation may well serve to change intended meaning. For example, Rosen (1995:40) famously showed how '*The butler stood at the door and called the guests' names.'* contrasts sharply with '*The butler stood at the door and called the guests names*.' Similarly, the omission of the comma in the question *'Shall we eat, Grandma?'* gives us a most alarming suggestion. As for the importance of the full stop, '*I am sorry you cannot come with us.'* conveys a very different message from '*I am sorry. You cannot come with us.'* Punctuation use is not an exercise in technical mastery of high and low levels, yet, to a child, the pyramid's message is apparently clear and unambiguous: 'Brackets are more advanced than speech marks'. However, it is patently absurd to suggest to a child that written dialogue will be superior if the lower-level inverted commas are replaced with higher-level brackets! The pyramid gives the impression that a high-level writer will need to demonstrate high-level punctuation. By the time that writer goes to university, it stands to reason that s/he will need a very high level of punctuation indeed.

Ironically, books on academic literacy at university level usually have very little to say about punctuation, leaving the student who wishes to self-improve rather bereft of help and information. Of five regularly-borrowed books from the libraries of the University of Greenwich (Bailey, 2015; Solomon, 2013; Brandt, 2009; Gillett *et al,* 2009; Levin, 2004), only two (Bailey and Gillett *et al*) make overt reference to punctuation – and these two together dedicate only three pages to the subject. Given that these five books have a combined output of over 1,150 pages focused upon academic writing, the compelling assumption must be that, amongst writers of books on academic literacy, correct punctuation by students is taken for granted. We who mark the essays know differently.

Education policy

The drive to use impressive vocabulary and punctuation is symptomatic of the tendency of successive governments to elevate knowledge over skills when formulating education

policy. For example, Morgan (2015) stated the following when presenting education policy after the publication of a new national curriculum (DfE, 2014).

> "At the heart of our reforms has been a determination to place knowledge back at the core of what pupils learn in school. For too long our education system prized the development of skills above core knowledge"
> (Rt. Hon. Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education, 27th January 2015).

Most primary school teachers would agree that education philosophies at either end of the pedagogical 'skills versus knowledge' spectrum do not lead to a balanced education for children. Carr (2009) observes that, although the drivers of educational policy may hold binary views as to the ‘best’ form of education of educational philosophy, teachers tend not to advocate skills over knowledge, or vice versa. Children need both.

The long-term effects of ‘up-levelling’ punctuation

The following responses were taken from individual developmental tutorials I conducted after a recent formative essay submission during an induction week, where weak or eccentric punctuation in each student's work was discussed. The responses demonstrate how each of these students had the ‘know-of’’ about punctuation, but did know have the ‘know-how’ to go with it.

> Kate: *I was terrified when I handed that essay in. I wanted it to be good enough for university. I wanted to impress, so I used grown-up punctuation.*
>
> Femi: *I really, really did not want to fail my very first essay. I wanted to write at a proper standard. I’ve never used colons before. I thought it might help.*
>
> Andrea: *I’d read other students' essays. There’s four of us who are friends. We showed each other what we had done, and they’d all used posh words and lots of punctuation, so I did too.*

The strategy adopted by Kate, Femi and Andrea – to use punctuation to impress – demonstrates that, though they may know of various forms of punctuation, they lack the skill to punctuate appropriately. Such liberal application of punctuation marks, without understanding of how each works, is an error common to a significant minority of our undergraduate students.

Our current undergraduate students are, in part, the product of their primary education and, although they know about the hierarchy of punctuation, they do not necessarily know what to do with that information. They have been taught that a hierarchy of punctuation exists, but a proportion of them, in pursuit of 'better' writing, uses that hierarchy indiscriminately.

Conclusion

The most meaningful outcome of my tutorials with Kate, Femi and Andrea was that they all left my office unencumbered by their previously strongly-held, but errant, notion that now that they were at university they were required to be impressive in their use of punctuation and vocabulary. I am of the view that we would, during induction, do our students a great service were we to teach and assure them that an essay is an exercise in clarity, not in literary gymnastics. The implication of the punctuation pyramid is that ‘complex is best’, but if

students arrive at university still labouring under this misconception, they may well find that their experiences, progress and grades will suffer accordingly.

McDonald (2016) concludes by saying: "Introducing children to new words which they did not know before is ... powerful [but] this needs to be done in a context" (p.20). The same is true of punctuation. In all aspects of writing, primary-aged children and university students alike would do well to value, master and utilise the humble and the appropriate, rather than misapply the seemingly impressive. That strong yet simply-punctuated sentences are preferable to unnecessarily complex ones is advice that needs to be voiced during induction; it will be received with relief by most students.

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