

HOW TO TEACH



Commas, colons, connectives and conjunctions

Literacy

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To my eldest genetic son, Leonard Joseph Beadle, who is the human on this planet I most wanted to meet, who I waited thirty-six years for, whose birth was the most transcendent moment of my life, who has never disappointed me, and whom I love as much as breathing.

And to Kevin McKellar, my first role model as a teacher, of whom not one of the thousands of children whose lives he touched would remember him as anything other than the kindest of saints, and who was taken when he still had decades of brilliance left.

A better man than me. RIP.

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PREFACE

At many points in this tome, you'll find there are instances when I have not obeyed my own advice; this is entirely deliberate. You'll find, for instance, that there are countless occasions on which I've *deliberately* put an adverb before a verb. In these cases I've *judiciously* weighed it up, and *definitely* felt I could *probably* cope with the slight jarring effect it *clearly* produces on the psyches of both reader and author. I also guide teachers not to allow their students to use capitals to display volume when there are a good few examples in the book of me doing the exact thing I'm briefing against. The reason for this is that, unlike your students, I am a partially functioning, independent adult who makes a meagre part of his living from writing. I am not seeking to impress examiners; I seek to entertain. My examiner is the reader, and if you have read one of my books before, you will know pretty well what you are going to get: an array of borderline inappropriate knob jokes stretched over an obviously spindly structural device, somehow fleshed out into a borderline cohesive narrative by the bludgeoning weight of the humour, that somehow, against the odds, teaches you loads of stuff you didn't know. I don't have to follow my own advice for teaching children how to write as I am not a child, and if I didn't already know all of the things in this book I wouldn't have been able to write it. I think there are also a couple of occasions where I use three exclamations together!!! I am allowed to do this because it is clear I am taking the mick. Children are not allowed to do this. You have to be in late middle age to get away with it.

I also need to warn you, as if you needed warning, about the 'appropriateness' (or not) of some of the humour. I am 49 years of age, have no interest whatsoever in the vagaries of social nicety and speak in my own voice, not some anthropologically esoteric academic code. Try not to be offended. If you are of the mind to try on that particular coat, and if anything in this

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book offends you to the point that you cannot take the information in it seriously, chuck it in the bin.

And let us now bring up a perspective about writing, and about the rules, that one must have some cognizance of in order to do it with any degree of skill: sometimes you've just got to go with the feel. That isn't to say that you should use going with the feel as an excuse for your ignorance of the rules. But once you have some command of them, then you can start subverting the rules deliberately to create interesting effects, both rhythmic and semantic. Rules are important, of course, and this book exists to help you understand them and then teach them to the young people who need access to them, but don't make a theocracy out of them. They exist to provide the structure within which we might play.

On a related tangent, it would be foolish of me to ignore the possibility that this book might be chanced upon in a branch of Oxfam by some petty grammarian who regards 'proper' grammar as having some moral aspect. Such people are responsible, as A. A. Gill – a writer who did not let his dyslexia hide his brilliance – notes, for, "The dullest, most pompous letters a paper gets ... from the grammar Stasi agent who has been reading *Eats, Shoots and [sic] Leaves* on the bog."¹ If you are one of those people and you spot the mistakes the proofreader has made in the proofing of this book – it's her fault, not mine, shoot her! – then any assertion that the author of this book is a symptom of what he is trying to cure has an interesting self-referential surrealism, but is really needless nit picking. Go back to your *Daily Mail*.

I am for the working class being held worthy of intellectual respect, and I am also for teaching children the stuff they need to know to attain this. I don't always get things right, as I am self-taught. My teachers didn't know this stuff, your teachers didn't know this stuff, and that is why this book

1 A. A. Gill, 'Table Talk: Brasserie Chavot, London, W1', *Sunday Times Magazine* (2 June 2013). See page 59 for how *sic* works.

PREFACE

is necessary. Ultimately, what it stands for is democracy: democratisation of expression, democratisation of some minor elegance in the written and spoken word, democratisation of having a voice. And it is a book that, while overly proud of its own anger, is also in possession of a pair of truisms that, for me, are not ever shouted loudly enough or with enough steel or violence of intent.

The first of these is the statement that literacy *is* political, and the second, built on the first, is that equipping children from the lower social orders with heavyweight skills of expression, when combined with teaching them their place in the hierarchy, is the most potently subversive political act available to any human.

It is my perspective that the most important thing you learn in school is how to communicate; and it is also my perspective that, systemically, we – the educators responsible for growing future generations that might use their literacy to fight the manifold punitive orthodoxies inflicted upon them – do not teach this very well. As a result, the rich children who are educated separately from ours are allowed to grow up with the sense that they alone have the erudition, the mastery and the skills of articulation to properly engage with any political arena. Furthermore, the elites have been indoctrinated to believe that they (somehow) have ownership of the language.

I will leave it to A. A. Gill, whose view of social class is radically different to that one might expect from a columnist in one of the ‘top people’s’ papers, to point this out from the left bank of the inside. Speaking of the English language as an unstoppable river, he writes, “Nobody can alter its path of its destination, it belongs to whoever finds it in their mouth. It washes away dictionaries and lexicons and fun licking grammars. It is global and as free as breathing and the only truly democratic thing we own. Don’t let anyone tell you that it’s more theirs than yours because they don’t dangle participles.”²

2 Gill, ‘Table Talk’.

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Use this book to teach children to speak, to write, to read well. Use it to alter their destinies. Use it to teach them that there are rules, and they are worth learning. But, I repeat, don't make a theocracy out of them. And don't forget: to be properly nourishing, and to properly inspire, the line betwixt work and play should not always be immediately visible.

BARRIER 1

POOR LITERACY SKILLS AMONGST TEACHERS (PARTICULARLY IN TERMS OF THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF PUNCTUATION)

We have all been in the situation where we have gone to our pigeonhole and taken out a written communication from a colleague, and pondered, grimly exhaling, as we've intoned, "Sheesh! I really like _____, but should he/she really be a teacher?" Likewise, those of you who are parents may well receive weekly newsletters from your child's school, and might possibly have noted, regularly and ruefully, every Friday, that the writer of the newsletter and the possessive apostrophe may never have been that close at any time, but are clearly significantly estranged now.

It is understandable how this has happened. In many ways teaching, an impossible job with endless hours, is not something you would recommend to 'high quality' graduates who could command vastly better salaries working for commercial firms. Consequently, prior to the import of some of the 'Teach Firsters' who have saved education from itself, most teachers were as thick as two particularly rotund Cuban cigars on a fat day, and as dull witted as a partially redeemable masonry nail. This is further compounded by the fact that not all teachers are English teachers. Some have other specialisms.

As a result, the carpentry teacher, who may well be a really bloody good carpenter, is not necessarily wildly nuanced in his use of the semicolon.

Fair enough.

But it doesn't help the poor child, desperate to learn how to write, when some of his teachers are not really able to do so with any particular fluency or knowledge of the rules themselves.

POPPING THE FALLACIES

There is another very serious issue, which is the amount of really damaging wrong information in teachers' heads that they blithely pass on to students. This is not the fault of the teachers or the students. Teachers were, themselves, taught stuff about literacy by their own teachers that was (and remains) patently untrue, and they have seen no reason to question it. But there are various 'rules' that have hung around like the stench of fear at an abattoir, and these 'rules' have made a decent contribution to messing up a lot of children's ability to write.

By way of an insight into the problem, I'm going to ask you to take a wild, imaginative leap and imagine that the writer of this book is 11 years of age in something other than emotional maturity; I am new at secondary school, and have really, really tried really, really hard, and lots of really, really lovely teachers at my primary school have done their absolute best to help me, but I just can't work out where the full stop goes, and all I want is a rule to help me, that's all I want, please can you help me, please can you define a sentence, to help me stop writing sentences that are over seventy words long, life at school would be so much easier if I had a simple rule I could apply, does it go here, because I think I've prob'ly finished what I wanted to say

BARRIER 1: POOR LITERACY SKILLS AMONGST TEACHERS

Can you come up with a watertight rule that defines where the full stop goes for an 11-year-old, level 2 learner? Have a go. See if you can do it. What, exactly, is a sentence?

Here are some answers:

- *A sentence must make sense.* No, it mustn't. I'll get my 10-year-old son to explain: "My Dad certainly doesn't make any sense at all after he's come back from the pub with Martin Robinson. He speaks in sentences about how much he frucking gloves us, but they don't actually make any sense at all. Maybe they're just fragments." The boy is right, of course: some really hyperactive sentences nestle like a broken alliterative cup fox aside the jam jar and wardrobe of jismy meaning. They don't necessarily make any real sense. They're still sentences.
- *A sentence must have a clause.* I'm sorry. I'm only 11, but I find the notion of clauses to be somewhat too abstract. It's a rule I want.
- *A sentence must have a subject, a verb and an object.* No.

The point in asking this question is not to make you feel daft: it is to fess up. I've never been a clever enough teacher to help this kid. All he wants is a rule, and I can't provide it for him. The best I've done so far is to teach him what a verb is, and to tell him a sentence has to have one (unless it is direct speech, in which case any old fragment will do, or you are trying on the groove of a GCSE version of style where the one word sentence is king). I've got nothing better, and I continue to fail him. I've found that with the kids who can't get anywhere near an accurate full stop, getting them to identify what a pronoun is, and then putting the full stop directly before it, has some vague traction as an idea to help them to a first understanding of how things work.

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But other than this, I've been pretty useless to needy kids of this variety over a twenty year teaching career.¹

The aim here is to identify something quite important about literacy: some of the skills that we take for granted as adults – every reader of this book can place a full stop correctly, I'd hope – are actually way more difficult to define than we think. It's one thing being able to do something yourself, it's another being able to teach it.

Let's try another one. Where do you put a comma?

(Deliberate pause for slightly too arch ironic effect)

If your immediate response to this question is to reach in the direction of the pause,

(Deliberate pause for self-referential, ironic effect)

or the breath,

(Deliberate pause for repetitive, self-referential, ironic effect)

then don't be embarrassed: you are no less well-educated than about 80 per cent of secondary school teachers, and thankfully very few primary teachers. (Honest!)

But if you learn nothing else from this book, learn this: you do not put a comma where you want to take a breath! It is an absurdity that teachers perpetrate because they haven't actually thought about things. What if you

1 However, since writing this, I've been in the presence of a genius: a gentleman from Chichester College, who says that he teaches it by getting the young person to put a full stop after every seventh word, and then gets them to read their work out loud and see if there is a better place to put it. This works because, in truth, the full stop does come after you have finished what you were going to say, and it is related to the rhythmic fall of the cadence.

Does it matter if teachers cannot tell a connective from a conjunction?
Does it matter if students think you use a comma when you want to
take a pause, or if they introduce lists with semicolons?

It matters!

This book is about getting it right. Its author is an expert in teaching children how to speak and write well, and has transformed the oral and written communication skills of thousands of students. Here he shares how he does it, what he knows about this most important of all skills and what every teacher needs to know in order to radically transform literacy standards across the curriculum. The stories, anecdotes and insights into the many practical activities in this book are, in turn, and often in the same sentence, heartbreaking, inspiring, shocking and, as ever, funnier and more readable than those in an education book have any right to be.

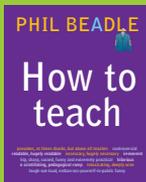
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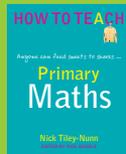
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@PhilBeadle

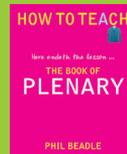
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