We have a failing school,” our curriculum coordinator announced on the first contract day in August. If we didn’t improve our adequate yearly progress (AYP) within two years, he said, the state could replace staff. My school’s language scores on Idaho’s multiple-choice No Child Left Behind (NCLB) test, the ISAT, had met AYP. The incoming ninth graders hadn’t, so the principal took me aside and asked that I review everything on the language test before spring. He wanted a plan, but the list of tested skills was huge and the time to review had to come from somewhere. One administrator suggested that I cut the writing program because “the students take the Idaho Direct Writing Assessment for the last time their freshman year. You teach tenth graders. They don’t have to write; they just pick the correct answer.” I hoped he wasn’t serious. Writing is as essential to language arts as breathing is to life. And testing, designed to quantify students’ learning with a number, could not be allowed to suffocate writing time.

Although I didn’t care whether my students could press the computer key that would tell the State Department of Education that they could identify appositives, I did care whether they could use them in their writing. Hadn’t the test creators read the research? Writing couldn’t be tested with multiple-choice questions. Was it possible to find defensible connections between my state’s conventions-heavy, multiple-choice ISAT and sound writing instruction?

Connecting Literature, Writing, and Testing

As I planned the To Kill a Mockingbird unit, I began searching for answers from professional books and magazines—and from the students in room 204. They taught me how to teach writing and the ISAT’s language skills successfully.

Like the metaphor embedded in Harper Lee’s title, students are mockingbirds. They have been imitating, mocking the language they have heard throughout their lives. Parents taught them their first words. Now, as adolescents, they are rebelling against home and imitating a larger world, choosing words their parents don’t understand such as boo-yah, dis, and wack. For their written words to be understood and valued outside of their circle of peers—and to pass the ISAT—they need to learn and follow the conventions of Standard American English.

As we began our time with To Kill a Mockingbird, I paired the novel study with conventions work to begin reviewing the tested skills. After reading students’ writing assignments, I knew their writing needed greater sentence variety. Trying to read great literature without imitating it is like listening to a new song and then trying to get the tune out of your head. The novel’s opening sentence, “When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow” (Lee 9), gave them an introductory dependent clause to imitate—and a way to use that structure to talk about memories.
A few students from the ranching community insisted that they didn’t need to write sentences a different way. Punctuation was stupid. They couldn’t worry about where the comma went when working with the cows on their ranches. Pinned against the side of a cow’s stall, they would focus on the message: “If ya don’t get off me, I’ll . . .” I smiled at the pause in that sentence before replying, “Cows can’t read. I punctuate when I write, not when I feed cows.”

Many students in Eastern Idaho and elsewhere in the United States know that their families’ ranches no longer have the earning power to support the next generation. They must find financial support elsewhere, and that means knowing how to use appropriate language in a variety of situations. When Renee, the leader of the classroom rebellion, talks about her cousins who attend a rival school and says, “We seen them after the game. We was laughing at them because we won ‘em,” she is imitating choices that will bar her from the respect in other quarters that she enjoys as a member of a hardworking ranching community. She also must learn to imitate those who hold the power—and the lien on the ranch.

Renee would be understood on the family spread where she slapped a cow’s rump to keep the animal moving, but slapping a reader with Eastern Idaho–ranching dialect would not help her succeed off the ranch or on the ISAT.

Students and their parents have been snubbed by hotel clerks and loan agents after they have spoken. Susan Losee Nunan observes, “Social convention and status, equivalent to choosing to burp or not to burp at a formal dinner, dictate that we dare not send students into a world that views grammar and proper speech in this way without the necessary tools to succeed” (72). When writing letters, some had already experienced what Peter Elbow describes: “Writing without errors doesn’t make you anything, but writing with errors—if you give it to other people—makes you a hick, a boob, a buppkkin” (167). To move past these stereotypes, students would need to move forward with their knowledge of conventions.

As we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* together, Renee and her classmates continued to struggle with their use of commas that followed introductory dependent clauses. I was frustrated. Basing my instruction on Lee’s sentences should have helped, but it hadn’t. Why weren’t the students learning? Renee cued me in. They were emulating Lee.

“I understand what you say about those commas and all that,” Renee said, “but this Lee woman don’t write that way!” She showed me an example from their current reading assignment: “If I didn’t have to stay I’d leave” (Lee 24). “See,” Renee said triumphantly, “she don’t put a comma in.”

That night I did a study of Lee’s comma use with introductory dependent clauses. On page 36 a sentence lacks one: “When he completed his examination of the wisteria vine he stalked back to me.” However, on the next page, the comma is there: “If I didn’t go to school tomorrow, you’d force me to” (37). I turned the page, and the next sentence with an introductory dependent clause deleted the comma: “When Atticus looked down at me I saw the expression on his face that always made me expect something” (38). But in the next paragraph, the sentence, “If you’ll concede the necessity of going to school, we’ll go on reading every night just as we always have” (38), left the comma in.

I sighed. The students doubtlessly were reading about Scout’s frustrations with school and applauding. If they studied the author’s use of the comma on these pages, they would say, “When sentences begin with *if*, you use a comma after the clause; but when sentences begin with *when*, you don’t.” No wonder these students devalued punctuation rules. The rule I was touting and the author I was promoting were in opposition. In despair, I consulted a grammarian, Rei R. Noguchi, to get an answer: “Some handbooks state that the comma should be inserted only if the introductory phrase or clause is a ‘long’ one, usually set arbitrarily at five or more words; however, students who add a comma even for ‘short’ introductory phrases and clauses can hardly go wrong, given the arbitrariness of what constitutes ‘long’” (61). The one-correct-answer ISAT was not arbitrary on this rule. The comma belonged after the clause. Was Lee a negative example? Ludicrous.

Punctuation rules had changed since Lee wrote. What about the similarly punctuated sentences written by currently published authors?
How could I explain why these writers could break the rules? Tom Romano explains his approach to teaching conventions: “I want students to steadily improve their skills in language and in producing written texts that reflect the norms of standard edited English (and to break those norms when they can do so meaningfully)” (74). He advocates rule breaking for valid communication or artistic purposes—but he was not preparing students for a high-stakes test.

So what should I do? The students had grabbed their hair and told me that learning punctuation was going to drive them crazy. Edgar H. Schuster agrees with their reaction—although he is referring to the editing rules used by publishing houses: “I don’t mean to downplay these rules, since knowing them is empowering, but trying to teach and learn them has driven not a few teachers and students to the brink of substance abuse” (xii). The students’ need to pass the high-stakes ISAT made me disagree. Romano encourages students to break conventions—with a caveat. He advises, “I also want them to realize that if their writing is a mechanical disaster, their natural voice might be dismissed by others, regardless of how authentic, colorful, and pointed it is” (73). I believed that I had to protect students’ ability to pass the ISAT and write successfully for grammatical purists. When students asked why they couldn’t punctuate as some modern novelists did, I fell back on an explanation like the one that Lynne Truss uses in her bestseller, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. She is referring to the comma splice, but I applied her words to all broken rules: “Done equally knowingly by people who are not published writers, it can look weak or presumptuous. Done ignorantly by ignorant people, it is awful” (88).

Truss’s stance would take students past the ISAT, but would it take them to their best writing? Conventions give creativity credibility. If I had previously taught conventions as a list of headache-inducing rules, students needed more than a new pain prescription; we needed stress relief. The students needed to see the beauties and power of punctuation, not another list of rules to make them pull out their hair.

Punctuation animates words because those symbols have a meaning. Wallace Stegner explains their importance in *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*: “We are dealing with a complicated system, and every element of that system, down to the conventional signs for pauses and nuances, has had a long testing. Its function is to help reproduce in cold print what was a human voice speaking for human ears” (qtd. in Spandel 120).

I began sharing sentences that “cold print” had invested with life. Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton recommend this technique: “A productive way to facilitate this work is to read students the original sentence and articulate with them some of the things that make it powerful—reading it closely and parsing it for meaning” (40).

I put a life-invested sentence I had found in *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the overhead projector because I wanted to point to the punctuation as I talked. In Lee’s sentence, Scout is losing her argument against returning to school: “‘No sir,’ I murmured, and finally made a stand: ‘But if I keep on goin’ to school, we can’t ever read any more. . . .’” (38).

With the sentence in three-inch illumination, I began. “Look at that colon,” I said, jabbing at the stacked dots. “Remember how we said it could be used to introduce a quotation or other comment that illustrated or..."
Bonnie Mary Warne

explained a statement? When I see that colon, I know an important statement is coming. For Scout, it’s her big argument against going to school. Notice the comma after the dependent clause. And look at the ellipses at the end. When you see that punctuation mark, you know something more should come. Her voice fades out. Scout expects Atticus to have a solution to her problem, and he does. Punctuation imitates what our voices do when we speak. Now, you try it. Try using a colon right before you explain your final, most important argument, or tell a story, drift off at the end with it unresolved, and use ellipses.”

Renee had a hard time with my parsing and said, “Punctuation don’t do all that. I’m telling you. You put that in there with your voice.”

I explained again, “Yes. That’s what punctuation tells us—what the voice does.”

She clung to her opinion and reiterated, “Not to me it don’t.”

On Monday, as Renee sat in class and wrote about her grandfather’s hip replacement, she said, “Teacher, come here. Read this.” Renee had described her grandfather getting out of bed after hip surgery. She had gone to help him and asked how he got his shoes on by himself. He had answered, “‘T ain’t hard when you don’t take ‘em off at night.” I chuckled and congratulated her. But Renee wanted more, “Yeah, I know. He’s funny. But the rest of it don’t sound right.”

Renee had imitated her grandfather’s vocalizations as easily as a fledgling imitates the songs it hears in the nest. She recognized that he deleted the short i sound from it ain’t and the th sound from them. She had even used apostrophes correctly to show the omitted letters. She had lived with her grandfather since she was three and captured his speech with ease, but her exposure to written discourse had been shorter. She didn’t recognize that her paper didn’t “sound right” because she had started every other sentence with he. I reminded her of other ways to start sentences and of beginning sentences with dependent clauses, which we had just discussed. Renee finally learned to use sentences that began with dependent clauses because she was able to apply the skill within her writing. Renee had a skill because she saw repeated examples, because she wanted to learn it, and because she had someone to help her connect the two. It was a technique that I found worked with every aspect of conventions, from basic spelling to advanced syntax.

Even though using sentences by authors hadn’t worked immediately with Renee, the technique had caused both her and the class to study Lee’s writing more closely—originally to prove me wrong. Once the students believed they needed a skill, they began changing their language usage to conform to Standard American English conventions. They were learning to be mockingbirds. Just as those imitative birds vary their songs with the sounds they hear, the students were learning to vary their language with the sentence models they read.

All students needed to hear many songs to swell their sentence repertoires. I collected strong sentences from the literature we were reading, from the books most frequently checked out of our media center, and from the newest books in the bookstores. After cataloging these sentences according to the rules they demonstrated, I used them to teach. I had students write sample sentences to illustrate each rule. Harry R. Noden assured, “Used properly, imitation internalizes writing techniques that students can later apply in infinite ways” (70). I hoped one of those warbles, chirps, or twitters would also be correct answers on the ISAT.

Because sentence combining had the research-proven track record for increasing sentence variety and William Strong suggested creating those kernel sentences from literature (73), I delved into my growing collection of sentences and broke them apart for the students. I selected sentences both from the book we were reading and recent library purchases. Sentences by current authors piqued interest. When the students needed to review commas used with coordinate adjectives, I chose a sentence from Coraline by Neil Gaiman. I asked them to combine a list of kernel sentences:

The other was locked.
The door was big.
The door was carved.
The door was brown.
The door was wooden.
The door was at the far corner.
The door was in the drawing room.
When volunteers read their combinations, we told them what we liked about their sentence. Next, I placed the author’s original sentence on the overhead. We liked some of the students’ combinations better, and we said so. The original Gaiman sentence, “The other—the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far corner of the drawing room—was locked” (8), draws attention to the “otherness” of the door through the use of the attention-drawing dash. I explained how Gaiman used the dash to foreshadow the door’s unique-ness—even before the reader knew about its connection to another dimension. As a class, we hadn’t covered dashes yet, but that didn’t matter. By this time I had praised students every day for effective sentence constructions. Knowing why this sentence had my admiration interested them.

On days when they struggled to put the parts together into a sentence, I treated it like word play, a puzzle, or a game. Their experimentation carried over into their writing. Their new sentence variety wasn’t always correct, but errors are a sign of growth. What true experiment has a guaranteed result? They liked having the other students ooh and aah over their work.

As we talked about our sentences in class, I made sure that we used the grammatical terms that the ISAT employed. Constance Weaver argues against this necessity. She uses as example and proof the works of published writers: “[creative writers] often demonstrate exceptional command of the syntactic resources of the language, yet they rarely can name the constructions they use. And the point is that as writers, they don’t need to” (123; italics in original). However, as ISAT takers, the students did need to.

Students gradually became better and more confident writers. David D. Mulroy stresses the important connection between confidence and knowledge of conventions: “The sense is palpable that the young authors can capture random thoughts and images precisely because they are in conscious control of the formal elements of their medium. Nothing does more for creativity than self-confidence, and nothing does more for self-confidence than conscious understanding” (112). And my conscious understanding of the defensible connections between sound writing and an indefensible test gave me conscious control over my teaching—thanks to my students’ classroom rebellion.

Works Cited


**Bonnie Mary Warne** teaches English at South Fremont High School in Saint Anthony, Idaho. She is a teacher-consultant with the Northwest Inland Writing Project at the University of Idaho, Moscow. email: bonniew@sd215.k12.id.us.

---

**EJ 90 Years Ago**

**Condemning Bad English**

During the past few years, the most conspicuous discussions of the perennial question of good English have consisted largely of accusations of illiteracy against the graduates of American schools and colleges. Thanks to the diverting blunders of each year’s output of graduates, it has been fairly easy to support these accusations with an array of examples at once convincing and entertaining. The easy accessibility of illustrative material may be partly responsible for the fact that sweeping condemnation of bad English has long been a favorite theme with a certain group of educational critics, whose specialty is the making of novel and startling assertions for newspaper consumption. The bolder spirits among them, being willing to risk controversy, have gone farther and have attempted to fix the blame upon some particular agency—for example, parents, newspapers, elementary- or secondary-school teachers, college professors, or hyphenated citizens. The resulting disputes have served to arouse a certain amount of public interest—in the disputants, at least—but they cannot be said to have settled the question of responsibility, nor to have aided materially in the solution of the problem.