



How to Teach Using Commas to Clarify Meaning in Upper Key Stage 2

“ Children in years 5 and 6 should learn to use commas to clarify meaning or avoid ambiguity.”

National curriculum statement

Commas have many different purposes; to separate items in a list, to separate clauses, use after an introductory clause, embed clauses, indicate direct address and for use in dates and addresses. In upper key stage 2, children must use commas to clarify the meaning of a sentence; this means creating a correct pause in the sentence to ensure it makes sense in the context which it is meant. A commonly used example of commas to clarify meaning is in the sentence, ‘The panda eats shoots and leaves’. When the comma is placed between eats and shoots the word ‘shoots’ changes from a noun to a verb, changing the meaning of the sentence which has no comma.

Key Vocabulary

comma, ambiguity, clause

Common Misconceptions and Errors

Many children do not naturally pause in a sentence. This should first be encouraged in their reading, looking carefully at the punctuation and using it when reading aloud. Encourage children to read a sentence out loud to identify the correct position for the comma or pause.

When writing a sentence, a child may know what they mean without thinking about its ambiguity for the reader. Prompt children to re-read for sense or partner with a peer who is more likely to spot errors in comma usage.

Bringing English to Life

Provide children with a number of silly sentences that could be considered ambiguous if the comma is placed incorrectly. Allow children the opportunity to move the comma placement in the sentence to create a new meaning for that sentence. For example, ‘Let’s eat Grandma!’ can be changed to ‘Let’s eat, Grandma!’ with the simple movement of the comma, changing the sentence’s entire meaning.

Example Questions to Develop Understanding

- What is a comma used for?
- How can the use of a comma change the meaning of a sentence?
- What is meant by an ambiguous sentence?
- Why is it important to clarify the meaning of the sentence for the reader?

Teaching and Learning Points:

- Provide children with two identical sentences, one containing a comma and the other without. Ask children to discuss how the comma changes the meaning of the sentence. For example, ‘**We bought chocolate yoghurts and strawberries.**’ compared to, ‘**We bought chocolate, yoghurts and strawberries.**’
- Once children understand the importance of the comma when clarifying meaning, task them with adding commas to other sentences to change the meaning.
- Children can be challenged further by explaining how their comma usage has affected the sentence.
- Children could then be given an image of some items from the supermarket. Children could use commas to list these in different ways to alter the contents of the shopping list. For example, ‘**John bought some jelly ice-cream, banana pancakes and crisps.**’ whereas, ‘**Sarah bought some, jelly, ice-cream, banana, pancakes and crisps.**’



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