

The Man From God Knows Where (Punctuation and Phrasing)

The reason we read is to gather meaning from the words on a printed page. To help us comprehend their meanings, authors use punctuation to help in gaining that understanding. One of the most important punctuation marks is then comma. Diana Hacker writes in A Writer's Reference. "The comma was invented to help readers. Without it, sentence parts can collide into one another unexpectedly, causing misreading." There are many rules for using a comma. For me, it is like taking a walk, the commas are short pauses used to gather thoughts together then you take the next step.

For example: I never noticed until now now that I have reached a time to leave.

The above example makes little sense if you read it all together. Yet, if one coma is added then the words make sense: I never noticed until now, now that I have reached a time to leave.

Poems are good vehicles to introduce your student to commas. Poems use commas and white space to bring attention to pauses. Haiku poems (check your local library) are short and offer striking examples of pauses. In To Hear the Rain, Peggy Lyles suggests we read her poems, "Slowly.

Individually.
More than once.
Preferably aloud."

Try using the following examples to demonstrate how pauses create meaning from the words.

Example 1: grandfather's boots last summers dirt on the floor

Now try reading the same words with pauses:

Grandfather's boots
last summer dirt
on the floor

Example 2: Christmas Eve under the car's hood a stranger

Christmas Eve
under the car's hood
a stranger

I once read a title on a record album and that title has become my favorite example of how a comma is used to create meaning:

The Man From God Knows Where

Here we think of someone who bounces from town to town and from job to job. No-one knows him very well. Yet what happens if we insert a comma?

The Man From God, Knows Where

Here the man becomes wise and knowing. He may be a Minister. When this person speaks - everyone listens.

Bring commas to the attention of your student. Show them how they add meaning to words on a page. The comma is often overlooked as we spend so much time deciphering words, yet those words can lose their meaning without commas to guide them.

Works Cited:

1. Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
2. Lyles, Peggy. To Hear the Rain. Illinois: Brooks Books, 2002.