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## CONVENTIONS 101



# CONVENTIONS 101

## A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING (AND ASSESSING!) GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

CHAUNA RAMSEY



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## Introduction: Why Should I . . . ?

Welcome to the wonderful world of teaching things you never had to learn.

Why do I say that? Because if you're anything like the 99% of English teachers I've known, you grew up reading books, needing them like others need air. This need probably resulted in lots of positive outcomes, like high SAT scores (Verbal, anyway . . .) and a life-long love of literature, but it probably also resulted in some not-so-positive outcomes, like an inability to avoid sneering when you see an incorrectly used apostrophe and a growing frustration over why your students insist on driving you crazy with their written conventions.

If you're reading this book, chances are, you never had to learn how to use a comma. Nobody ever had to teach you that "a lot" is two words. But you know what? The vast majority of our students DO need to be taught these things, and it's your job to teach them. Not because the world will stop spinning if your students continue to splice sentences with commas, but because they deserve every advantage you can give them, and this you can do. The truth is, nobody else is going to do it, and the students who need to learn correct conventions are not going to learn them like you did, through reading.

Teaching conventions is not always barrel-of-monkeys fun, but it is satisfying. It also gives you and your students the opportunity to enjoy something not common in the world of Literature and Language Arts: OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT. Yes—you, too, can employ the "right or wrong" method of assessing at least this small part of teaching English. The arts of "language arts" still include the heartbreakingly subjective assessment of and response to all types of student writing, but if you choose to incorporate conventions into your course, you can—at least in this small way—be cheerleader and coach instead of judge and jury. And you can give your students valuable and necessary knowledge and skills they will use for the rest of their lives.

### About this book

Before you start using this book, you should probably know that it's not 100% correct. What I mean is, I teach my students that "affect" means "alter" and that "effect" means "outcome." But the truth is, sometimes "affect" is a noun that doesn't mean "alter" at all, and sometimes "effect" is a verb. I don't tell my students that (and this book doesn't teach that) because the only people who will look down on them for making that error are people whose opinions they should not be concerned about. (Yes, I did just end a sentence with a preposition, and if that bothers you, this book isn't right for you, although it might be just right for your students.)

There are tens of thousands of grammar textbooks out there. What makes this one different? Glad you asked. I think it's different in three ways.

- 1) This book was written by someone with 24 years of experience teaching at public high schools and colleges.
- 2) This book zeroes in on errors commonly found in students' writing, but it doesn't use phrases unfamiliar to students. I love knowing how to hyphenate phrasal adjectives, for example, but I'd never teach hyphenation using those words. I don't really care whether or not my students know what a dependent clause is; instead, I want them to know when they should use a comma instead of a semicolon. To be fair, I guess I do teach students certain phrases like "fragment" and "run-on," but for the most part, this book is about function—not terminology.
- 3) Perhaps most importantly, this book includes something I haven't seen in others: comprehensive assessment. How many of us have successfully taught the difference between "their," "they're," and "there," only to have the same errors pop up in students' writing two weeks later? The quizzes in this book are cumulative, so students are less likely to forget what you taught two weeks ago.

### Dear instructors,

Even if you don't decide to use this book, please do consider teaching conventions to your students. Yes, your students' previous teachers should have done that. Maybe they did; maybe they didn't, but here we are. Take this opportunity to learn how to teach something you never had to learn. I think you'll find your students are grateful and more eager to please you than they are to frustrate you. If you teach at the high-school level, I encourage you to find out the college placement

test your local community college uses, and arrange for your students to take the Writing part of that placement test at the beginning and the end of the school year. The results will shock you. Because the vast majority of these placement tests (Compass, Accuplacer, etc.) are multiple-choice, they rely heavily on students' knowledge of conventions. Incorporating conventions into your course can result in huge gains on these tests, which saves your students time and money when they aren't required to take remedial college courses.

Please email me if you have questions, concerns, quibbles, corrections, or suggestions. This is very much a work in progress, and I hope it always will be. I have not provided answer keys in this book, but if you need them, email me. I also have lots and lots of units of study, cumulative vocabulary programs with Latin and Greek parts of words, approaches to literature, and all the other stuff English teachers can't help but re-create every year, so if you'd like any of that, email me—I'm happy to share.

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P.S. This book is licensed under creative commons, so don't make money with it but do use it to make your teaching life a bit easier because if you're an English teacher, you need an easier life.

P.P.S. If you do sometimes really want to know the RIGHT answer, I cannot recommend highly enough *Garner's Modern American Usage*, by Brian Garner. It's a fabulous resource (and a great gift for all word nerds) written by a man who's smarter than anybody deserves to be.

# First Things First: Conventions Pre-Test

Chauna Ramsey

## Conventions Pretest

This is a quick, low-pressure pre-assessment of students' skills. I tell students everyone who completes the exercise gets the points—it's not a quality-based point system with pre-assessments because I haven't yet taught them anything.

Students in my classes silently complete the pre-assessment and bring it to me. I then hand them out randomly and we correct all but the last page, which I later correct myself.

I give prizes for the top three scores on the part we correct in class—a piece of candy or something. Students then get their own pre-assessments back so they can see how they did on the first three pages. I collect them all so I can score (or at least glance at) that last page.



## Unit 1: A Lot; There, They're, Their; To, Two, Too

PDF: A Lot; There, Their, They're; To, Two, Too

Word: A Lot; There, Their, They're; To, Two, Too

This is the first set of overhead instructions, overhead practice, individual handouts / and worksheets. The unit includes the first quiz.

I suggest working on a three-class-session rotation system with all of these units. Day 1: Introduce the concepts, work as a class on the overheads, and assign the worksheets. Day 2: Review the concepts, correct the worksheets, and catch up anybody absent for Day 1 instruction. Day 3: Give the quiz and correct.

When I have a skilled group of students, I don't assign the worksheets, but I do make them available for practice. An alternate way of checking to see who does and who doesn't understand the concepts is to ask students to write a sentence using "their" and "too," for example. These sentences are quick to correct and prove to students that they don't always know what they think they know.

Since quizzes are cumulative, students absent for a quiz simply take the next quiz and write at the top that it counts for two. I believe that requiring students to write answers in the quiz blanks gets it in their heads a bit more, but you can always save some time by allowing students to circle the correct answers instead or even transfer quizzes to a Scantron form.



## **Unit 2: Your, You're; Its, It's; Woman, Women**

PDF: Your, You're; Its, It's; Woman, Women

Word: Your, You're; Its, It's; Woman, Women

This is the second unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in Unit 1. Also included is a pre-assessment for the concepts covered in Unit 3.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.

Since quizzes are cumulative, students absent for a quiz simply take the next quiz and write at the top that it counts for two. I believe that requiring students to write answers in the quiz blanks gets it in their heads a bit more, but you can always save some time by allowing students to circle the correct answers instead or even transfer quizzes to a Scantron form.





## **Unit 3: Where, Were; Could Have, Could "Of"; Lose, Loose**

PDF: Where, Were; Could Have, Could Of; Lose, Loose

Word: Where, Were; Could Have, Could Of; Lose, Loose

This is the third unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in Units 1 and 2.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 4: Whose, Who's; Fewer, Less; Choose, Chose**

PDF: Whose, Who's; Fewer, Less; Choose, Choose

Word: Whose, Who's; Fewer, Less; Choose, Choose

This is the fourth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in Units 1-3.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 5: Accept, Except; Who vs That; Lose, Loose**

PDF: Accept, Except; Who vs That; Lose, Loose

Word: Accept, Except; Who vs That; Lose, Loose

This is the fifth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 6: All Ready, Already; I vs Me; Affect, Effect**

PDF: Already, All Ready; I vs Me; Affect, Effect

Word: Already, All Ready; I vs Me; Affect, Effect

This is the sixth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.





## **Unit 7: Everyday, Every Day; Defiant, Definite**

PDF: Every Day, Everyday; Defiant, Definite

Word: Every Day, Everyday; Defiant, Definite

This is the seventh unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 8: Capitalizing Pronouns; All Right vs "Alright"**

PDF: Capitalizing Pronouns, All Right vs Alright

Word: Capitalizing Pronouns, All Right vs Alright

This is the eighth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 9: Commas in a Series; Commas After Introductory Phrases**

PDF: Commas in a Series; Commas After Introductory Phrases

Word: Commas in a Series; Commas After Introductory Phrases

PDF: Commas, Five Uses For, Plus Elmo Practice

This is the ninth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 10: Commas with "So," "Or," "But," "And"; Commas with Interrupting Elements**

PDF: Commas with SOBAS and Commas with Interrupting Elements

Word: Commas with SOBAS and Commas with Interrupting Elements

This is the tenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.





## Unit 11: Comma Review

PER: Comma Review

Word: Comma Review

This is the eleventh unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## Unit 12: Fragments and Run-Ons

PDF: Fragments and Run-Ons

Word: Fragments and Run-Ons

This is the twelfth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## Unit 13: Semicolons

PDF: Semicolons

Word: Semicolons

This is the thirteenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## **Unit 14: Punctuation and End Quotation Marks; Punctuating Titles**

PDF: Punctuating and End Quotation Marks, Punctuating Titles

Word: Punctuating and End Quotation Marks, Punctuating Titles

This is the fourteenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.





## Unit 15: Colons

PDF: Colons

Word: Colons

This is the fifteenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## Unit 16: Apostrophe Pre-Assessment

PDF: Apostrophe Preassessment and Punctuation Review

Word: Apostrophe Preassessment and Punctuation Review

This is the sixteenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## Unit 17: Apostrophes

PDF: Apostrophes

Word: Apostrophes

This is the seventeenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.



## Unit 18: Subject-Verb Agreement

PDF: Subject-Verb Agreement

Word: Subject-Verb Agreement

This is the eighteenth unit of conventions, with overheads for introducing information, overheads for whole-class practice, worksheets, and a quiz which includes concepts covered in previous units.

Again, I recommend following a three-class-session structure, with the first day being an introduction of concepts, the second day a review, and the cumulative quiz on the third day.





## Unit 19: Final Exam; "Rejected" Notice; Cheat Sheet

PDF: Final Exam

No Credit Due To Poor Conventions

Conventions Cheat Sheet

This is the nineteenth unit of conventions, which is a final exam rather than a unit of study.

Also above find an easy “rejected” slip you can print and attach to any piece of student writing that’s too full of errors to be of passing quality.

There’s also a link to a “cheat sheet” for all 18 units of study.