

Teaching ideas



- Encourage the children to collect examples of the types of form-function anomalies noted above, discussing how context and punctuation choices affect the meaning conveyed. Stock phrases in conversations between unequal participants (teachers and pupils; parents and children) can often provide reliable examples.

- The straightforward use of question marks can be demonstrated in shared writing. Most children catch on to their use quite quickly, and find their elegant shape appealing. Shared writing tasks which are engineered to demonstrate the difference between reported and direct speech (for example, transcribing an interview, followed by writing a summary of the interview) provide useful opportunities for demonstrating the conventions mentioned above.

Exclamation marks

Subject facts



Exclamation marks are used to represent utterances which in speech would require exclamatory force or raised volume, expressing either surprise, anger or some other strong emotion:

This wine is utterly superb!

What a pity you've lost your appetite!

I'm sick of you going on about food all the time!

The exclamation mark is one of the easiest marks to recognise and use, but it is probably as well to reserve its deployment for genuinely 'strong' utterances. Over-indulgence devalues a useful mark, and gives writing a sense of insincerity or gushy enthusiasm:

We found a wonderful little tea shop behind the market in St Helens! They sell genuine Eccles cakes baked on the premises! And the tea is made with old-fashioned loose leaves!

The doubling or trebling of exclamation marks is common in informal writing such as comics and personal letters, but it is definitely to be discouraged in more formal texts.

Why you need to know these facts

- Exclamation marks are another device that children latch on to quickly and are eager to adopt. Consideration of how the use of this mark affects the tone of the prose it is applied to is essential in familiarising writers with different levels of textual formality. These marks can be frequent in texts which children are most familiar with; they are, however, regarded as inappropriate in many of the genres they are expected to produce.



Amazing facts

In the mid 20th century, an attempt was made to popularise a new punctuation mark which combined the effects of question and exclamation marks to represent the tone of such utterances as:

You've eaten how much ice cream?!

It consisted of an intertwined exclamation and question mark, and was known as the interrobang. It did not catch on.



Handy tip

It is a good rule of thumb that in formal writing, such as essays, job application letters and official reports, the exclamation mark should not be used at all.

