

Editing By Ear

It is easier to hear where end punctuation belongs than to see where it belongs. Noam Chomsky's research in the 1950s¹ tells us that children acquire the syntax of their native language in the early months of infancy and are born with the ability to do so. By the time they reach school age they understand the complexities and nuances of the language in which they have been raised. It is this understanding that makes editing by ear possible. The use of aural skills to edit for punctuation, organization, and repetition is described in the following sections.

What Works

1. **Editing By Ear for Sentence End Punctuation and Beginning Capitalization.** (About 25 minutes for first and second graders; 20 minutes for older students. Repeat the model several times during the first semester.)

Have you ever seen Victor Borge, comedian-pianist, perform his punctuation routine? He reads a short selection of prose, using an array of vocal sounds and hand gestures to indicate each of the punctuation marks required in the piece. Of course, the sounds are silly, and the piece is overloaded with punctuation to increase the hilarious possibilities.

This routine can be adapted as a model for Editing By Ear. Present it to developing writers as early as first grade. In first grade, you may want to restrict the exercise to only one end-punctuation — periods. Older students can keep track of questions and exclamations as well.

Requirements:

- a Big Book of fact or fiction (Select one with the full variety of end punctuation.)
 - author's chair
 - an easel and a pointer
 - predetermined peer partnerships with assigned places to meet
- a) Gather the class in front of an easel. Older students may remain in their desks or gather in front of Author's Chair.
 - b) Tell them you are going to show them an easy way to edit for end punctuation and capitalization.
 - c) Ask the students to read chorally with you from the Big Book. Encourage them to do it with feeling. Read declarative sentences with a slight voice drop, exclamations with a rise and more volume, questions with a rise and pause. As you reach the end of each sentence, point out the end

¹ Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, p. 49.

punctuation. Often a student will point out that the next sentence starts with a capital letter. If none does, do so yourself.

- d) Continue with the choral reading until you think most of the students get the connection between the end punctuation and the sound of their voice. With older students, continue until you have covered all the types of end punctuation.
- e) Now take the Big Book from the easel so that the students cannot see the text, and read it aloud to them. As you read to them, ask students to snap their fingers or cluck with their tongues when they hear the end of a sentence. Invariably, some students will cluck and snap at random for the novelty of it. Acknowledge that urge, and invite them to practice the snap and cluck for a moment or two. Then quiet them and proceed.
- f) Point out how your voice sounds when you reach question marks, periods, and exclamation marks. The class may suggest two new signal sounds for questions and exclamations. Great!
- g) Now, invite a young writer to read his piece to the class. The class will listen for periods, question marks, and exclamations marks and make the agreed signal sounds. The writer may have a pencil with him to add end punctuation he has left out.
- h) You will observe that the writer usually reads with greater than usual feeling and will start to look up expectantly when he reaches the end of sentences, anticipating classmates' clucks or snaps. Remind the writer, if he adds some end punctuation in response to the signal, to start the next sentence with a capital letter.
- i) Invite a second student to read a manuscript. Repeat the procedure.
- j) Now invite all the writers in the class to try this kind of editing in peer partnerships or groups. Give your young writers a few moments to read their pieces to themselves so that they can read smoothly. Remind the class that the job of the reader is to read the piece with feeling. The job of the listener is to give the signals and ask if the writer has a capital letter after the end punctuation.
- k) Do not expect one-hundred percent accurately edited work. This is a trial and error session.
- l) Move around the class encouraging the partnerships.
- m) After five to eight minutes, stop and ask the writers to put their initials on the top of the other writer's paper after helping to find the end punctuation.
- n) Ask partnerships if they found any missing end punctuation. Place the emphasis on the success of the editors, not the error by the writer. Ask, *Who found places where they could clap or cluck?* Invite the student to share the sentence and end punctuation. Let your students know that it was great if they found any. What good editors they are!
- o) Remind the writers that they will have a chance to do this again. Ask them to think about end punctuation and capitals the next time they write.

A second grade teacher told me of an editing problem in her class and wondered how to cope. She had followed the principle of writers editing each other's work but had asked them to edit visually. She considered the independent editing a failure because many children were putting a period at the end of every line of each other's work. Their papers looked like this:

I went on my bike to.
the park my mom took.
me and my brother I.
got hurt I fell off my.
bike on the side walk.
and skinned my arm.
and knee.

This is a good example of how young children tend to interpret information literally and concretely — in this case, the instruction to put a period at the end of each sentence. They thought of the end as a physical location and viewed the word string on each line as a sentence. They thus placed periods on the right hand side of the paper where each string ended. The key factor was that these young writers did not yet understand the abstract notion of a sentence.

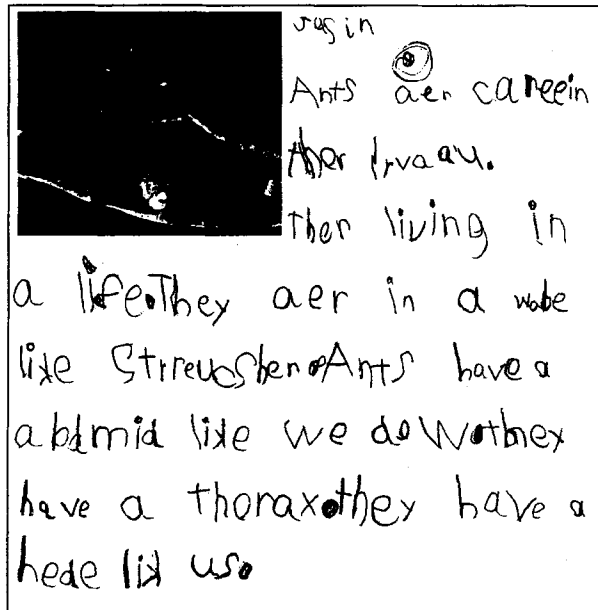
In this situation, the teacher said to me, “This doesn’t work. It’s a case of the blind leading the blind.” She was prepared to drop class editing until she had taught lessons with worksheets about subject and predicates. I convinced her instead to work on choral and murmur reading and to Edit By Ear for periods. I modeled the procedure for her class. She pursued it and had enough success to continue with independent editing.

2. **End-Punctuation as a Target Skill.** When young writers are familiar with practicing and using Target Skills, add a writing convention to the required skills in a genre block. Listing Periods or Series Commas in the upper right hand corner of their papers next to an icon of a target helps students remember to use them. They will check for these target skills during peer conferences.
3. **Editing by Ear for Paragraphs.** We think of paragraphing as an organizational skill and may teach it in conjunction with the prewriting or planning stages of writing. I have found, however, that young writers understand more about paragraphing and cohesive paragraphs when they learn about them in conjunction with editing. When developing writers know the reasons for paragraphing, they more readily apply them in the editing stage than in drafting.

Just as students can be trained to hear end punctuation, they can also learn to hear where new paragraphs start and when sentences are off the topic. Before they can do this, they must understand paragraphing concepts.

Paragraphing skills should be introduced to developing writers as they start to extend their writing to include development of ideas, when they are working on organization based on webbing (usually around third and fourth grade).

You might teach paragraphing to the whole class or to a selected group whose writing indicates they are ready.



“Ants are carrying their larvae. They’re living in a leaf. They are in a web-like structure. Ants have an abdomen like we do. They have a thorax. They have a head like us.” (First grader)