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ABSTRACT

A computer-assisted analysis was conducted of the punctuation skills taught in nine series of language arts textbooks. Each text was subjected to a detailed, page-by-page analysis of instructional content, resulting in a content-specific analysis of punctuation instruction at each grade level. The results indicated significant differences among the texts in the treatment of punctuation skills. Some texts, especially those stressing the primacy of oral language, gave the subject minimal attention. Those that gave greater emphasis to written composition tended to include a correspondingly larger number of exercises. Differences among texts also extended to the grade levels at which specific skills were introduced. The introduction of quotation marks, for example, began in five different series at five different grade levels. Seven other punctuation skills spanned four grades in level of introduction. Of the 34 different skills noted in the analysis, only six were taught in all nine textbook series. Seven of the nine series expanded punctuation instruction dramatically in the third grade. Another significant jump occurred in fourth grade, but it was difficult to locate commonalities among the texts beyond the fourth grade. In summary, it was difficult to detect a systematic pattern of instruction reflecting an expert body of opinion. (RL)

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PUNCTUATION INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Larry A. Gentry

ABSTRACT

An analysis of nine language arts series was undertaken to identify the scope and sequence of punctuation instruction in elementary schools. Similarities and differences among texts and implications for instruction are discussed.

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PUNCTUATION INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Larry A. Gentry

A perfunctory consideration of writing instruction might lead one to believe that the teaching of punctuation skills is a relatively stable and straightforward aspect of the curriculum; language arts educators should be in general agreement regarding how and when such skills should be taught. Unfortunately, this is not the case. A review of the pertinent literature reveals that there are two major areas of dispute: (1) To what degree should instruction in punctuation be emphasized at the elementary and/or secondary school levels? (2) Should punctuation skills be taught systematically or only indirectly?

The two concerns are not unrelated; those who believe that punctuation skills should not be emphasized generally support indirect instruction, and those who call for a greater emphasis usually favor direct and systematic instruction. Tiedt and Tiedt (1967) are illustrative of the first point of view:

Punctuation, like spelling, has been over-emphasized as an aspect of composition. Again, we stress the importance of placing primary emphasis in composition on the ideas expressed rather than the mechanics of recording the ideas. (p. 140)

Punctuation taught to students in the elementary school should be functional, that is, it should be punctuation needed by the student as he [sic] writes. (p. 141)

Irmscher (1979) offers a lucid argument on behalf of those who hold the opposing view. He believes that punctuation instruction should be organized and presented systematically and should begin early:

Almost inevitably by the advanced high school years and certainly in the college years, teachers have adopted an aloof attitude toward mechanics. The errors are there, but teachers rationalize that they must concern themselves with the more important matters of substance and structure. The irony is that a similar rationalization has gone on throughout the school years, so that the students' exposure to systematic instruction in mechanics has been rare and, at best, sporadic. (p. 118)

The question of how and when punctuation skills should be taught takes on new importance when one examines the propensity of punctuation errors in the writing of both children and adults. The large-scale assessment conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1969-70 revealed that punctuation errors were made by approximately 50% of the 9-year-olds, 40% of the 13-year-olds, 70% of the 17-year-olds, and 76% of the adults (NAEP, 1972). The fact that older writers make more such errors than their younger counterparts is explained by the fact that young writers write shorter papers and use relatively simple sentence structures, thus providing themselves with fewer opportunities to make mistakes.

The same trend is evident from the results of the 1978 British Columbia Assessment of Written Expression (Conroy and Rodgers, 1978). In that study, comma errors were made by 39% of the 4th-graders, 65% of the 8th-graders, and 75% of the 12th-graders.

Furness (1960) noted equally discouraging results from several earlier studies and concluded that mistakes in punctuation were "the most frequent type of mechanical errors in writing" (p. 185). She postulated that deficiencies in punctuation must be the result of one of two factors: either "punctuation is difficult to acquire, or it has not been and is not being well taught in our schools" (p. 185). While

this statement seems to imply that the cause may lie with either of the two factors, she suggests elsewhere that punctuation may be difficult to acquire because it is poorly taught. According to Furness, the studies she reviewed show that

children tend to have many of the same needs for using punctuation items at every grade level and that their ability to meet these needs shows little improvement as they advance through the various grade levels. This apparently means: (1) that few children have discovered the importance of these items; (2) that the items have been inadequately introduced; (3) that there has been insufficient review and drill upon the items to establish their use; and (4) that insufficient attention has been given to their use in genuine writing situations. (p. 185)

Unfortunately, few researchers have taken as much interest in writing mechanics as Furness. Cronnell (1980), in a review of the literature on punctuation and capitalization, found very few studies relating to the teaching of mechanics, and found none that were very helpful in determining effective methods of instruction.

Methodology aside, it would seem that one important variable in punctuation instruction is the relative difficulty of specific punctuation skills for students at different grade levels. Odom (1964) tested the ability of 1818 students in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades to use 49 various punctuation skills. He found that "there was a definite degree of difficulty relative to each of the punctuation skills" (p. 13). For example, 68% of the 4th-graders correctly placed a comma between the day and year in a date, but only 6% used a comma in separating the name of a person being addressed (e.g., Bill, can I help you?). Odom's findings point out the need for teachers to be aware of the relative difficulty of the various punctuation skills and to design appropriate instruction

for students at different grade levels. One problem here, of course, is that no definitive sequence of skills has yet been established. (Odom's study, for example, covered only three grades.)

How then, do teachers go about teaching punctuation? Given the fact that the subject is seldom mentioned in teachers' journals and the fact that little in the way of supplementary teaching materials are available for this subject, it is reasonable to presume that most teachers rely on classroom textbooks. According to a study conducted by the Educational Products Information Exchange Institute (EPJE, 1976), approximately 90% of classroom instruction is based on commercially prepared materials. If such is the case, then an adequate description of punctuation instruction must be gleaned from the texts that children use.

In an attempt to produce such a description, researchers at SWRL conducted a computer-assisted analysis of the skills taught in nine series of language arts textbooks (see Appendix A). Mechanics was one of twelve content categories included in the study. As a general content area, mechanics was divided into two subcategories--punctuation and capitalization. The results of the analysis relating to capitalization skills have been reported elsewhere (Gentry, 1980).

Using a matrix of skills designed by Humes (1978), the investigators subjected each text to a detailed, page-by-page analysis of instructional content. Each exercise was coded according to its specific instructional purpose (e.g., using a comma in a series, using a hyphen in compound words, etc.). These data were then processed by computer, resulting in a content-specific analysis of instruction at each grade level.

The results of the study indicate that there are significant differences among texts in the treatment of punctuation skills. Some texts, especially those that stress the primacy of oral language, give the subject minimal attention. Those that give greater emphasis to written composition tend to include a correspondingly larger number of exercises. Figure 1 shows the relative emphasis accorded punctuation by each of the nine series. The greatest difference is between Series F and Series G. While Series F provides only 85 exercises in all six grades, Series G provides almost seven times as many--a total of 541.

Differences among texts, however, extend beyond the amount of practice provided. One notable difference concerns the grade levels at which specific skills are introduced (see Appendix B). A dramatic example is the introduction of quotation marks. One series begins instruction for this skill in grade 1, one in grade 2, another in grade 3, five in grade 4, and another waits until grade 5. Seven other skills span four grades in level of introduction.

Of the 34 different skills listed in Appendix B, only six are taught in all nine series. The skills that all agree must be included are:

1. the use of a period at the end of a sentence,
2. the use of a question mark,
3. the use of a comma in a series,
4. the use of quotation marks,
5. the use of an exclamation mark, and
6. the use of an apostrophe in a contraction.

Five other skills are taught in eight of the nine series.

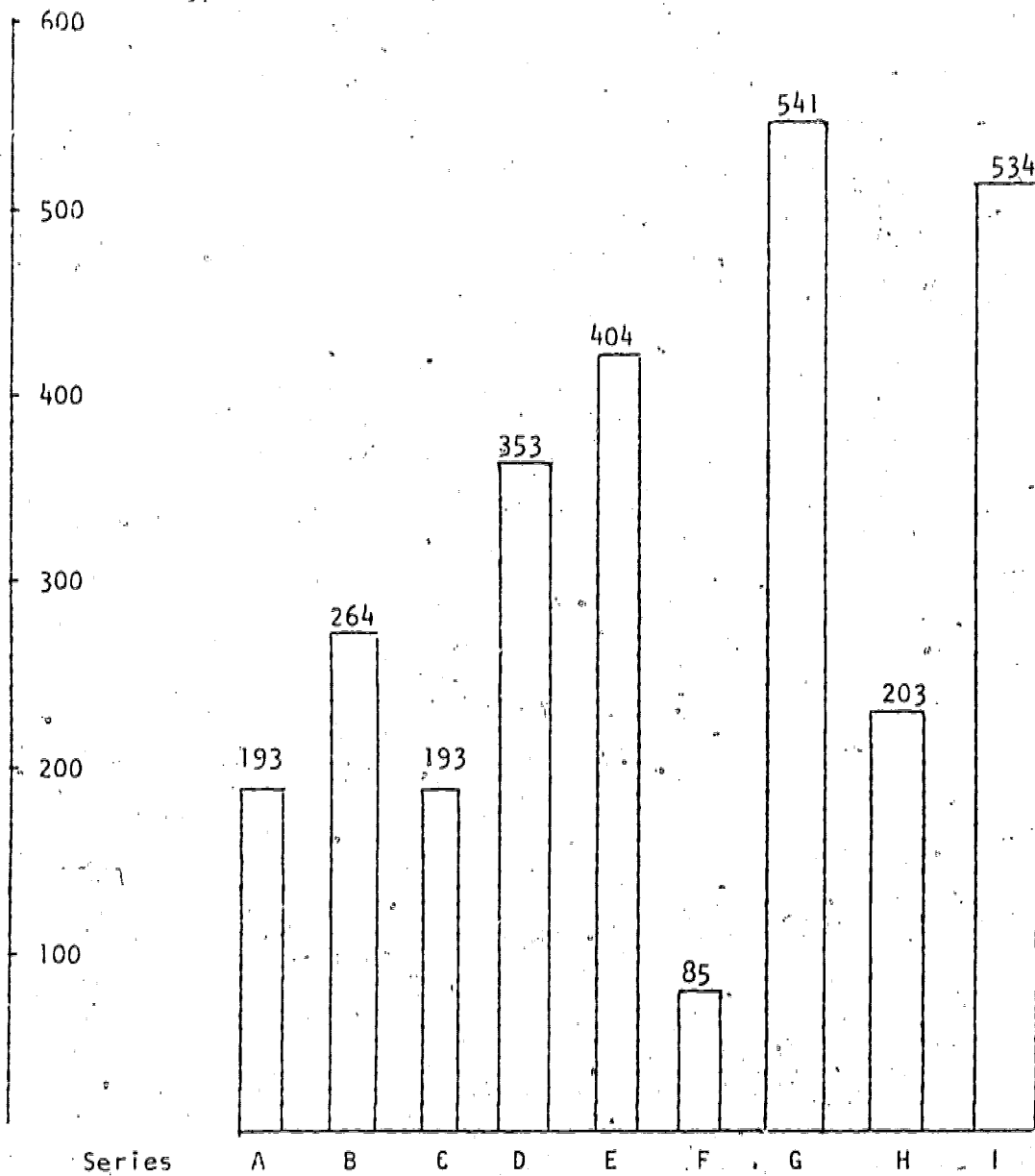


Figure 1

Number of Punctuation Exercises
in Grades 1-6 in Nine Series

The average number of punctuation skills taught per series is 20.8. Series B presents the greatest number of skills, offering instruction in 28 different types of punctuation. Series E provides the least number of different skills, teaching only 17.

Appendix C indicates the specific skills and number of exercises provided for each skill at the various grade levels. It is readily apparent that, with few exceptions, very little punctuation instruction occurs in the first grade. The most common skill taught at this level is the use of a period at the end of a sentence, but it is included in only five series. Four series introduce the use of question marks. The divergent treatment accorded punctuation is demonstrated by the fact that three series do not provide any instruction at all in the first grade, while one series (Series H) introduces students to seven different skills.

In grade 2, all nine series include exercises for the use of a period at the end of a sentence and for the use of question marks. Two series teach only those elements and two others add only the use of exclamation marks. Surprisingly, only two series offer any significant instruction in the use of commas. These same two series provide exercises in more than twice as many skills as other second grade texts, with each teaching eleven skills. In terms of the amount of practice provided, Series A has the least--only seven exercises, while Series G leads all texts with 69.

Seven of the nine series expand punctuation instruction dramatically in the third grade, indicating that most publishers believe that students at this level are capable of learning more than the basic uses of the

period and the question mark. Four skills account for much of the increased attention. They are: the comma in addresses (8 series), the apostrophe in contractions (8 series), the apostrophe in possessives (6 series), and the period in non-sentence elements such as abbreviations and initials (5 series). The divergent philosophies of various publishers are again apparent in third grade instruction, with two texts providing more than 100 punctuation exercises and two others providing fewer than 20.

Another significant jump occurs in fourth grade. Eight skills (some taught previously in a few series) are now added to the total taught in a majority of texts. One is included in eight series: the use of quotation marks. Four of the skills involve various uses of the comma; one pertains to the use of the exclamation point; another is the use of punctuation within quotations, and the final skill involves the use of the colon. The median number of practice exercises among fourth grade texts is 50. Series G leads all series with 145 exercises, while Series H provides the fewest with 20.

It is difficult to locate commonalities among texts beyond grade 4. One series (Series E) continues to provide a substantial amount of practice, but does not present any new skills. Another (Series F) introduces one new skill, but provides a total of four practice exercises in grade 5 and only two in grade 6. Series C leads all fifth grade texts by presenting six new skills; three sixth grade series introduce three skills each, the greatest number of new skills taught at that level. In terms of number of practice exercises, three series provide more practice at grade 4 than any other level, two reach their instructional

peak in grade 5, and three in grade 6. (One series (Series H) provides its greatest number of exercises in grade 3.)

In summary, it is difficult to detect a systematic pattern of instruction that can be said to reflect an expert body of opinion. That is no doubt due to the paucity of research in the field and the differing views of language arts authorities regarding the proper place of punctuation instruction in the curriculum. Until further research is conducted and disseminated and until a majority of authorities reach agreement on matters of educational philosophy, it is likely that such instruction will continue to be inconsistent among texts.

The present situation indicates the need for textbook selection committees to be aware of the divergent content in language arts texts and to establish careful criteria for adoption. At the classroom level, teachers must be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the texts they are using, and must be prepared to supplement instruction appropriately.

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APPENDIX A

Language Arts Series Analyzed

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- Martin, J., & Olson, D. C. Patterns of language. New York: American Book Company, 1977.
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- Thoburn, Tina, Cox, A., McLeod, A., Schlatterbeck, R., Terry, A., & Thoburn, Terry. Macmillan English: Series E. New York: Macmillan, 1979.

GRADE LEVELS AT WHICH PUNCTUATION SKILLS
ARE INTRODUCED IN NINE LANGUAGE ARTS SERIES

	Series and Introductory Level								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions	3	4	3	3	3	2	2	1	3
Apostrophe: plurals	3		5	6	3	3	3		
Apostrophe: possessives	3	4	4	3	3	2	2	1	
Colon: introduction of material		6	4	4			4	4	6
Colon: separation of material		4	5					6	6
Colon: other		4			4				4
Comma: addresses (i.e., city, state)	3	4	3	3	3		2	1	3
Comma: ambiguity			6						
Comma: compound sentences	5	4	3	6		2		5	4
Comma: dates	4	2	3	3	3		2	2	5
Comma: dialogue		4	4	4		4	2	2	5
Comma: direct address	3	4	5	3		4	4	3	
Comma: introductory clause	5		6			4			
Comma: introductory grouping	6	4	5			4			
Comma: introductory phrase		5	4		4			6	
Comma: letters (i.e., greeting, closing)		4	3	4	3		2	1	4
Comma: nonrestrictive clause						4		6	

Appendix B (continued)

	Series and Introductory Level								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Comma: parenthetical elements	5	6	5	6	3			4	4
Comma: series	3 ^a	4	3	4	4	3	4	3	4
Comma: titles					3		5		
Comma: words of speaker		5		4					
Comma: after <u>yes</u> and <u>no</u>	3	4	5	4		4	4	3	
Dash: separating elements				4					
Exclamation Point	2	4	2	4	3	4	4	3	4
Hyphen: compound words		5	5	4					4
Parentheses		4							
Period: sentence	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)	3	4		4	2	1	2 ^b	1	3
Punctuation within quotation marks	4	3	5	4		4	3	2	6
Question Mark	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
Quotation Marks	4	2	4	4	4	4	3	1	5
Semi-colon: dividing series		4							
Semi-colon: dividing clauses		4				5			4
Underlining titles		4		3	3		2		

PUNCTUATION EXERCISES IN
NINE LANGUAGE ARTS SERIES

GRADE ONE

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions								1	
Apostrophe: possessives								2	
Comma: addresses								1	
Comma: letters								2	
Period: sentence	1	3					7	4	8
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)						1			
Question Mark	1						2	3	6
Quotation Mark								1	
Total	2	5				1	9	15	14

Appendix C (continued)

GRADE TWO

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions						4	6	4	
Apostrophe: possessives						3	5	2	
Comma: address							12	1	
Comma: compound sentences						1			
Comma: dates		1					6	3	
Comma: dialogue							8	2	
Comma: letters							6	6	
Exclamation Point	2		6						
Period: sentence	3	1	12	6	11	2	10	5	7
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)					4		6	3	
Punctuation within quotation marks								1	
Question Mark	2	1	8	9	8	3	10	2	7
Quotation Marks		5						2	
Underlining Titles		2							
Total	7	10	26	15	23	13	69	31	14

Appendix C (continued)

GRADE THREE

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions	1		4	8	4	4	6	6	6
Apostrophe: plurals	5				1	2	1		
Apostrophe: possessives	4			5	13	3	12		27
Comma: addresses	5	2	2	2	10		8	5	2
Comma: compound sentences			1			1			
Comma: dates			2	2	10			3	
Comma: dialogue								8	
Comma: direct address	1			1					
Comma: letters			1	1	1			5	
Comma: parenthetical elements					1				
Comma: series	1		5			5		1	
Comma: titles					2				
Comma: after <u>yes</u> and <u>no</u>	1							2	
Exclamation Point	1		7		9			5	
Period: sentence	3	1	14	13	24		44	5	23
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)	2				15		12	3	6
Punctuation within quotation marks		2					8	7	

Appendix C (continued)

GRADE THREE
(continued)

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Question Mark	1	2	7	9	11		26	3	19
Quotation Marks		4					8	9	
Underlining Titles				8	10		5		
Total	25	11	43	49	111	15	130	62	83

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GRADE FOUR

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions	2	3		2	1	1	1		8
Apostrophe: possessives	1	4	3	2	5	8	5		11
Colon: introduction of material			4	1			5	1	1
Colon: separation of material		2							
Colon: other		3			1				
Comma: addresses	2	5		4	1		7		
Comma: compound sentences		1				3			5
Comma: dates	1	4		4			10		
Comma: dialogue		6	4	1		3	12	3	
Comma: direct address	4	1				3	4		
Comma: introductory clause						2			
Comma: introductory grouping		1				1			
Comma: introductory phrase			1		1				
Comma: letters		8		2			8	1	1
Comma: nonrestrictive clause						4			
Comma: series	4	4	5	5	8	4	6		6
Comma: words of speaker				3					

GRADE FOUR
(continued)

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Comma: after <u>yes</u> and <u>no</u>	4	4		2		4	4		
Dash: separating elements						1			
Exclamation Point	1	7		6		1	14	3	15
Hyphen: compound words				1	7				2
Hyphen: other			3			1			
Parentheses		2							
Period: sentence	2	12	5	18	8	1	16	3	21
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)		4			5	1	13	1	7
Punctuation within quotation marks	5	4		2		2	9	1	
Question Mark	2	10	3	15	2	1	19	3	15
Quotation Marks	7	5	7	9	4	9	10	4	1
Semi-colon: dividing series		2							
Semi-colon: dividing clauses		1							
Underlining titles		1		1	1		2		
Total	35	94	35	78	44	50	145	20	103

GRADE FIVE

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions	2	1	5	6	15		3		6
Apostrophe: plurals			1				4		
Apostrophe: possessives	2	6	1	5	19	2	5		12
Colon: introduction of material			3		3		4		
Colon: separation of material			3						
Colon: other		3							3
Comma: addresses	4	5	3	1	3		7	2	3
Comma: ambiguity					6				
Comma: compound sentences	2	2	1					4	13
Comma: dates	4	5	3	1	9		6	2	3
Comma: dialogue		6	4	1	10		10	5	1
Comma: direct address	5	2	4	1	8		4		
Comma: introductory clause	3				3				
Comma: introductory grouping			5		7				
Comma: introductory phrase		1			1				
Comma: letters		4		1	4		5	2	2
Comma: parenthetical elements	5		3						

Appendix C (continued)

GRADE FIVE
(continued)

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Comma: series	2	5	7	1	7		5		10
Comma: titles							2		
Comma: words of speaker		1							
Comma: after <u>yes</u> and <u>no</u>	7		2	1	4		6		
Exclamation Point	1	5	3	6	8		9	5	15
Hyphen: compound words		1	3						4
Hyphen: other					5		1		
Period: sentence	1	16	5	14	24		16	5	27
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)		2		1	15		15		1
Punctuation within quotation marks	7	3	4	7	9		9	4	
Question Mark	1	11	6	13	10		16	6	17
Quotation Marks	8	6	7	9	12	1	10	4	3
Semi-colon						1			1
Underlining titles		3		2					
Total	54	88	73	70	182	4	137	39	121

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Appendix C (continued)

GRADE SIX

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Apostrophe: contractions	5			11	1			2	8
Apostrophe: plurals	1			1	1				
Apostrophe: possessives	8	4		10	3		6	3	5
Colon: introduction of material		1					1	1	2
Colon: separation of material								2	8
Colon: other		3							
Comma: addresses	3	4		7	1		1	2	13
Comma: ambiguity			2						
Comma: compound sentences	8	2	3	6	1			2	18
Comma: dates	3	1		7	1		1	2	13
Comma: dialogue		6		9	3		8	3	6
Comma: direct address	4	3		6	7			1	
Comma: introductory clause	5		3						
Comma: introductory grouping	2								
Comma: introductory phrase		1	3					1	
Comma: letters		3		1			1		5
Comma: nonrestrictive clause								2	

Appendix C (continued)

GRADE SIX
(continued)

	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Comma: parenthetical elements	4	4		4					
Comma: series	4		5	6	5		2	2	16
Comma: words of speaker		5		9	1				
Comma: after <u>yes</u> and <u>no</u>	4	1		5	5			2	
Exclamation Point	3	2		9	2		2	1	15
Period: sentence	1	3		12	3		5	2	46
Period: other (e.g., initials, abbreviations)		4		1	1			1	5
Punctuation within quotation marks	6	1		8			8	2	7
Question Mark	1	1		13	3		7	1	23
Quotation Marks	8	5		12	6		9	4	8
Semi-colon						2			1
Underlining titles		2		4					
Total	70	56	16	141	44	2	51	36	199

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Appendix D

TOTAL NUMBER OF PUNCTUATION
EXERCISES IN NINE LANGUAGE ARTS SERIES

Grade	Number of Exercises per Series								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
First	2	5				1	9	15	14
Second	7	10	26	15	23	13	69	31	14
Third	25	11	43	49	111	15	130	62	83
Fourth	35	94	35	78	44	50	145	20	103
Fifth	54	88	73	70	182	4	137	39	121
Sixth	70	56	16	141	44	2	51	36	199
TOTAL	193	264	193	353	404	85	541	203	534

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