Punctuation—just one of the “mechanics” of writing, after all—is perhaps not the first thing you turn to after checking the CCC table of contents, but you are here now, so let me try to keep you here by announcing, quickly, the not unimportant claims to be made. First, manuals of style and college handbooks have it all wrong when it comes to punctuation (good writers don’t punctuate that way); there is, I propose, a system underlying what good writers, in fact, do; it is a surprisingly simple system; it is a system that enables writers to achieve important—even subtle—rhetorical effects; it is, even, a system that teachers can teach far more easily than they can teach the poorly systematized rules in our handbooks and style manuals.

It takes only a little study of the selections in our college readers to realize that the punctuation rules in handbooks and style manuals are not sacred texts for a great many good writers. Fragments and comma splices, violations of the coordinate clause and elliptical coordinate clause rules for commas, and inconsistencies in use of the comma with introductory word, phrase, and clause—these and other failures to follow the rules are frequent enough to raise questions about the rules themselves. Quirk et al. have examined statistical data on the use of the comma to mark coordination and concluded: “These results show we are dealing with tendencies which, while clear enough, are by no means rules. In such cases, it is probable that the general truth that punctuation conforms to grammatical rather than rhetorical considerations is in fact overridden” (1060).

John Dawkins, an instructor in the Language and Literature Department at Bucks County Community College (Pennsylvania) and English Department at Manor Junior College, has been an editor and author of elementary and high school instructional materials. He began thinking about punctuation because graduate-level courses in linguistics at the University of Chicago encouraged him to ask questions about language performance.
Moreover, handbook rules provide no instruction for use of the comma in the following:

(1) Slowly, he walked to the store.
(2) He walked, slowly, to the store.
(3) He walked to the store slowly.

And when we produce a sequence of three or more independent clauses, punctuation questions often cross sentence (or independent clause) boundaries, and handbooks do not offer help for such interdependent problems. Consider a sequence of three simple independent clauses:

(4) it caught my eye—I swiveled around—and the next instant, inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel——

There weren't any handbook rules to tell Annie Dillard to use a semicolon rather than a period or a dash or a colon or a comma splice between the first two clauses; or to follow that with a dash rather than a comma or a period or, yes, a colon between the last two.

And what do handbooks tell students about Orwell's punctuation of the following sentences from "Marrakech"?

(5) It was very hot and the men had marched a long way. They slumped under the weight of their packs and the curiously sensitive black faces were glistening with sweat.

(6) When a family is travelling it is quite usual to see a father and a grown-up son riding ahead on a donkey, and an old woman following on foot, carrying the baggage.

According to the handbooks, Orwell is wrong, for their rules are essentially a right-or-wrong approach, providing little—if any—basis for considering options according to rhetorical intentions. Such instruction is negative in that it tells students what not to do and how not to do it; better instruction—in any skill, I assume—is going to tell students what to do and how to do it, it is going to encourage the "good" behaviors, not discourage the bad.

Sentences and Independent Clauses

Conventional punctuation is grammar based—marks are prescribed in terms of grammatical structure—but what "good writers" do, writers like Orwell, is punctuate according to their intended meaning, their intended emphasis. It is an approach to use of the functional punctuation marks that follows "principles" rather than "rules." To understand the principles, however, one grammatical element must be recognized—the independent
clause. And the reason for this requirement is clear enough: all prose, written or spoken, consists of concatenations of independent clauses, and punctuation is a matter of showing appropriate relationships between them (some get punctuated as sentences, some do not). It is a mistake to assume that the sentence is the basic element in prose; it is also confusing, for it is the wrong basis for analyzing written language.3

To repeat: all discourse, written or spoken, consists of independent clauses or underlying independent clauses. The principle for "underlying" structures is well known: in spite of the missing element(s) in the surface structure, a clause is independent if the missing element(s) can be readily provided by a native speaker:

(7) Where are you going? Home.
(8) Mary read the book. John too.
(9) We went to the beach. Enjoyed the sun.

Sentences, therefore, are but one way of punctuating independent clauses:

(10) First it was rain. Then it was snow.
(11) First it was rain; then it was snow.
(12) First it was rain, then it was snow.

And so on—there are a number of other options for marking this boundary between independent clauses.

Sentences like (10)–(12) suggest a hierarchy of functional punctuation marks. The complete hierarchy is shown in Table 1 with the marks and their different degrees of separation (or connection, if you prefer) within independent clauses as well as between independent clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARK</th>
<th>DEGREE OF SEPARATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sentence final</td>
<td>maximum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semicolon (;)</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colon (:;</td>
<td>medium (anticipatory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dash (—)</td>
<td>medium (emphatic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comma (,)</td>
<td>minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zero (Ø)</td>
<td>none (that is, connection)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As this table suggests, the colon and dash have functions in addition to the hierarchical (to be explained later). The differences in the marks are made still more clear by categorizing them according to basic functions, which reveals a top two, middle two, and bottom two:

Table 2
Basic Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP (.;)</th>
<th>separate independent clauses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MIDDLE (: —)</td>
<td>separate independent clauses, or separate non-independent clause element(s) from the independent clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOTTOM (, Ø)</td>
<td>separate non-independent clause elements from the independent clauses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The functions in Table 2 are general and basic; in addition, they are used by writers—as my discussion of raising and lowering will explain—to gain separation (emphasis) by using an appropriate higher mark, a mark not limited to the next one up; and writers gain connectedness (under-emphasis) by using an appropriate lower mark, a mark not limited to the next one down.

Punctuating Single Independent Clauses

Sentences can be analyzed as single independent clauses with or without attachments or as multiple independent clauses with or without attachments. With a single independent clause, possible attachments create three patterns: pre-clausal, post-clausal, and medial. In each case, the writer must decide: Do I punctuate or don’t I?

Table 3
Patterns

| I  | (word/phrase/clause) + ptc? + John laughed aloud. |
| II | John laughed aloud + ptc? + (word/phrase/clause). |
| III| John + ptc? + (word/phrase/ clause) + ptc? + laughed aloud. |

In Pattern III the interruption may of course occur elsewhere within the independent clause.

Three of the four “rules” required by this principle-based approach to punctuation are needed to punctuate these patterns (rules that literate students will know or quickly learn without instruction):
As these tables indicate, the writer has choices, so there arises the question of how one goes about making these choices. The answer, theoretically, is simple, for it is found in anyone's principle of good writing; that is, it is found in the effort to get sentences to say what one means with the kind of emphasis one intends. The principle is general. All writers, evidently, want a sentence to say what they intend it to say. It is, of course, the same principle that guides choices among word and syntactic options; one chooses among the options the best one can. A little imaginative effort will suggest how, in the following examples, choices might be made according to "meaning and intended emphasis" (Summey 4):

(13) Surely (zero, comma, dash) the kid will come clean.
(14) The kid will come clean (any functional mark) and go home for a good night's sleep.
(15) The kid (zero, comma, dash, parenthesis) who has a guilty conscience (zero, comma, dash, parenthesis—each paired with the first) will come clean.

In ordinary contexts, one would expect the following:

(16) Today John went to school.

But one can easily create a context (John having been hospitalized for a year) which suggests:

(17) Today, John went to school.

The non-independent clause element in Pattern I might, of course, be greatly expanded:

(18) When Mary sat at her desk and gave careful attention to it and decided, finally, that John wasn't as foolish as he had acted, she . . .

But the principle is the same: meaning and emphasis.

For pattern II the problem is the same—does one want to mark a separation at the boundary or not? And the principle that guides the decision maker is, again, the same:

---

**Table 4**

Rules

| Rule 1 (for Pattern 1) | Only zero, comma, dash, or colon are permissible. |
| Rule 2 (for Pattern II) | All functional marks are permissible. |
| Rule 3 (for Pattern III) | Only paired marks (commas, dashes, zeros, and parentheses) are permissible. |
(19) John wanted the money (pct?) which he was owed.
(20) John wanted the money (pct?) which was right for him.
(21) John wanted the money (pct?) thinking he’d take Mary to dinner.
(22) John wanted the money (pct?) even though he hadn’t earned it.

For pattern III, the problem is different only in that the choice is “two marks or none”:

(23) The student (pct?) who was too sick to play (pct?) watched on TV.
(24) The candidate (pct?) deemed unfit for public office (pct?) won 70% of the vote.

Insertions in Pattern III can, of course, occur elsewhere: The candidate won 70% (pct?) according to his figures (pct?) of the vote.

Raising and Lowering

Within a sentence having a single independent clause, the basic marks are zero and comma:

(25) John asked for a date when he got the nerve.
(26) John asked for a date, when he got the nerve.

The comma gains some emphasis for the attachment. And, because of the nature of the hierarchy, the higher the mark the greater the emphasis:

(27) John asked for a date—when he got the nerve.
(28) John asked for a date. When he got the nerve.

Thus, justification for the sentence fragment.

Pressure to use a mark higher in the hierarchy I call raising. It develops naturally when commas within a sentence boundary mark different degrees of separation; thus meaning can be made more clear by using a higher mark at the major boundary. In the following sentence by James Baldwin, pressure for raising will be felt where Baldwin used the semicolons:

(29) I don’t think the Negro problem in America can be even discussed coherently without bearing in mind its context; its context being the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric.

Some writers might have resisted the pressure for the first semicolon and stayed with a comma; most, I think, would have used a dash instead of the second semicolon. In either case, the sentence illustrates conditions for raising.
Raising, obviously, calls attention to itself, and thus gains emphasis. And it is this emphasis that Frost evidently felt a need for in the next example. (30) I once heard of a minister who turned his daughter—his poetry-writing daughter—out on the street to earn a living, because he said there should be no more books written . . .

Raising is thus a device for gaining rhetorical effect. In (31) Alice Walker uses a comma instead of zero to gain emphasis; and in (32) Ellen Goodman chooses an even higher mark to gain even more emphasis:

(31) White men and women continued to run things, badly.
(32) Date rape, after all, occurs in a context, a culture that—still—expects men to be assertive and women to be resistant.

And why does Dillard want commas in the next example?

(33) I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go.

Pressure for raising accounts for two rules in our handbooks—a semicolon rule and a dash rule. If one or more of the items in a series has internal commas or if the individual items are lengthy, a semicolon at the major boundaries is needed for clarity, as in a sentence by Forster:

(34) We read that the Franks built it in the thirteenth century and called it Misithras or Mistia; that it became the chief fortress in the Peloponnese during an uninteresting period; that it was taken from the Franks by the Byzantines, and from the Byzantines by the Turks; that it was governed by a long succession of tyrants whose lives were short and brutal.

If the interrupting material contains commas, there is need for a higher mark at the major boundaries, and the dash is appropriate because, unlike the semicolon, it can be used in pairs, as in a Lewis Thomas sentence.

(35) Although we are by all odds the most social of all social animals—more interdependent, more attached to each other, more inseparable in our behavior than bees—we do not often feel our conjoined intelligence.

I propose that the hierarchy and raising account for these rules systematically—if you know the system, you know how to do it—and more effectively than the disconnected, essentially unsystematized rules in handbooks.

Notice, finally, that lowering—the opposite of raising—is also a natural consequence of understanding the hierarchical system. The semicolon in most of its uses, the comma splice, and the avoidance of a comma with a coordinator between independent clauses are common examples of lowering. Raising seems to be required, in certain contexts, to satisfy the need
for clarity—as in (29), (34), (35). Lowering, on the other hand, does not seem to be required by a contextual need for clarity, except in a more subtle sense of this need, as in a good comma splice.

Multiple Independent Clauses

Discourse consists of multiple independent clauses, and the good writer marks the junctures between them according to an intended meaning and emphasis. Punctuating between independent clauses is different from punctuating within the clause, but the answer is based on the same principle (meaning and emphasis) and on the same knowledge (recognition of the independent clauses).

There are but two devices for marking the juncture between independent clauses: the hierarchy of punctuation marks (Table 1) and a set of coordinate conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet, then). Let me emphasize that these are the only devices for marking the juncture between independent clauses—in spite of what handbooks and style manuals and workbook exercises tell us, or seem to tell us. Writers use these devices to convey semantic intent, and as they use them, they use the differences inherent in each group as well as combinations among them (more numerous than the brief list suggests) to produce their intended semantic effects.

Punctuation Alone

Table 5 is a further representation of the hierarchy as indicated in Tables 1 and 2:

| Table 5 |
| Degrees of Separation Between Clauses |
| MAXIMUM: | I gravitated to the random. I swung with the non-sequential.—Joan Didion |
| | I gravitated to the random; I swung with the nonsequential. |
| MEDIUM: | The fire is dying, the sparks scattering over the sand and stone: there is nothing to do but go. |
| | The fire is dying, the sparks scattering over the sand and stone—there is nothing to do but go.—Edward Abbey |
| MINIMUM: | And it is true that all of us write within traditions, we all have a history and a context.—Donald Murray |
| | And it is true that all of us write within traditions we all have a history and a context. |
The “meaning” of these markings ranges from maximum separation to no separation (or connection)—but see the remarks on the dash and colon below. And since we use punctuation to clarify our meaning and gain appropriate emphasis, it is reasonable that, for ease of reading, the two marks of minimum separation between independent clauses are not as effective as the marks of medium or maximum separation. Zero, of course, is even confusing (and found only in experimental writing or certain kinds of poetry where, however, it is used for the very reasons indicated by the hierarchy—to show connection where, normally, separation would be shown). The comma splice, however, is an intentional mark in the writing of most “good” writers and, as indicated by the hierarchy, shows less of a separation than the higher marks—thus the purpose, an absolutely legitimate purpose, of the comma splice, as illustrated in another sentence by E. M. Forster (a fearless comma splicer):

(36) He could not stand the insecurities that are customary between officials, he refused to make use of the face-saving apparatus that they so liberally provide and employ.

There is a similar difference between the period and semicolon—the significance of the hierarchy, after all, is pretty straightforward. Look at the following ways of punctuating some words by E. B. White:

(37) The great days have faded. The end is in sight.
(38) The great days have faded; the end is in sight.

White actually used a comma splice here—forgive the deception, a way to make two points at once.

The dash and the colon are similar in function and, sometimes, even in meaning (see Tables 2 and 5). For example, which one would you choose for E. M. Forster’s well known sentence:

(39) So Two Cheers for Democracy (pct?) one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism.

Forster used a colon, but I suppose that many of us would choose a dash (and if your background is British, you’d be tempted by a semicolon).

**Coordination Alone**

According to our handbooks, marking the boundary between independent clauses with a coordinator alone is not done—unless the clauses are short and clear:
(40) The hare slept and it lost the race.

But we note that sentences like the following are not infrequently found in the nonfiction prose of good contemporary writers:

(41) Well—the sun will be up in a few minutes and I haven't even begun to make coffee.—Edward Abbey

(42) He told them very badly but you could see there was something there if he could get it out.—Ernest Hemingway

(43) I could write a syndicated column for teenagers under the name "Debbie Lynn" or I could smuggle gold into India or I could become a $100 call girl, and none of it would matter.—Joan Didion

What, then, is the meaning signaled by coordinator alone? The answer lies in the hierarchical function of punctuation marks—to mark a separation (or degree of connection, if you will). Thus, in the absence of a separating mark, as in (41)–(43), the signal is just that: as close a connection as the system allows.

Punctuation with Coordinator

What happens when we combine a mark with a coordinator is what the hierarchy predicts: more of a separation. A long sentence by Didion illustrates both coordinator alone and coordinator with punctuation:

(44) But after a while the signs thin out on Carnelian Avenue, and the houses are no longer the bright pastels of the Springtime Home owners but the faded bungalows of the people who grow a few grapes and keep a few chickens out here, and then the hill gets steeper and the road climbs and even the bungalows are few, and here— desolate, roughly surfaced, lined with eucalyptus and lemon groves—is Banyan Street.

One can see clearly, in that sentence, the difference between the two possibilities with independent clauses: coordinator plus comma creates greater separation, greater emphasis, than coordinator alone; the options provided by these devices are needed—and used by good writers. To oversimplify and suggest that one should use a comma whenever a coordinator is used between independent clauses—or not use one when the second clause is ellipted—is to falsify the description of written English and to misinform the student. As a matter of fact, we commonly enough find coordinators between independent clauses with any of the punctuation marks:

(45) I wish good fortune to both sides, good will to all. Or conversely, depending on my mood of the moment, damn both houses and *pox vobiscum.*—Edward Abbey
(46) Find them, and clone them. But there is no end to the protocol.—E. B. White

(47) Whether or not our old drainboard was a guardian of our health I will never know; but neither my wife nor I have enjoyed as good health since the back kitchen got renovated.—E. B. White

(48) Since then I have walked, and prefer walking to horseback riding—but I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses' eyes.—Alice Walker

(49) ... the job in Burma had given me some understanding of the nature of imperialism: but these experiences were not enough to give me an accurate political orientation.—George Orwell

Even more options are available with ellipsis in the second or third clause, the most common form of which is the ellipted subject; the “rule” tells us to punctuate as follows:

(50) This is called “anchoring the mall” and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

But the system here allows the writer some options:

(51) This is called “anchoring the mall,” and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

(52) This is called “anchoring the mall”—and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

(53) This is called “anchoring the mall”: and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

Didion chose (50), but the other choices must be considered as “correct,” and perhaps as reasonable as well. Sometimes a writer will even choose maximum separation:

(54) But all I could do was to try to rein him out of it. Or hug his back.—Alice Walker

(55) It is made; not described.—Ernest Hemingway

The ellipted independent clause in the following example by Updike could be punctuated with any mark but zero, making five options:

(56) [Doris Day's] third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn. A heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

Yet five more options were available for Updike if he considered the deleted \textit{It was}. And with coordinator plus \textit{It was} there are—considering just
and—probably four more. A total of fourteen options for a writer to consider.

Notice that (51)–(56) are in fact examples of raising and represent options that good writers know how to exploit. Notice also that teaching a "rule" actually denies these options, for a rule indicates—at least for students—only one way of doing something, the "right" way; the rule thus denies students the opportunity to learn an important writing strategy. Which raises the question of pedagogy.

Pedagogy

Because the choices are limited (rules 1, 2, and 3) and the knowledge base specific (tables 1, 2, 3, and awareness of the independent clause), the punctuation system here is not difficult to learn. It is to be learned by doing—the way all language skills are learned, which means a lot of doing, of course. So instruction consists of enough examples for discussion (numerous in college readers) and enough opportunities in writing to develop the experience needed for making good choices. In providing these opportunities the teacher will realize one of the strengths of the approach: it encourages students to analyze their semantic and rhetorical intentions. The student doesn’t try to match his or her sentence with a rule in a handbook, then respond in a behavioral sense; instead, the student reads and considers her or his intentions and the reader’s needs, then decides according to an intended meaning and emphasis. We like to say, in our discussions of the writing process, that writing is thinking. Indeed! In contrast to the rule-matching process required by a handbook, this approach to punctuating is an expression of the writing-is-thinking premise, for it provides the occasion and the tools for thinking.

To teach the system one needs a few handouts (like tables 1, 2, 3, and 4) and a feeling for student needs in sequencing the material along with reading and writing assignments. For example, with basic writers one might want to present the hierarchy but limit initial practice to the period, comma, and zero (one can write a flawless paper with just these marks). Good instruction will then sequence the introduction of writing problems according to student needs. Of course, learning a system well takes lots of practice. Good writers get lots of practice; students should too.

As should be clear by now, learning to punctuate effectively requires only a little knowledge of grammar, much less than most English teachers will grant. One needs to recognize an independent clause in one’s writing, which requires bringing to a conscious level what one knows intuitively. All native speakers have what linguists call a “competence” that includes the ability to speak and comprehend independent clauses; so students who
are native speakers quickly enough master the consciousness-raising task of identifying subject and finite verb (irregular syntax obviously requires additional work).

An appealing aspect of this meaning-based approach to punctuation is that it allows for individual differences in its application. (The fifth-grader, for example, should use his or her knowledge of the hierarchy—which may be incomplete, of course—according to his or her intentions.) A good writer chooses to *do* something (to choose a word, to begin a sentence adverbially, to punctuate). In choosing to do there is a positive, a constructive, a meaning-creating approach to writing: in contrast, in obeying a negatively worded rule, there comes a negative attitude, a negative approach to the process, for the student is punctuating to avoid error rather than to create meaning. Learning theory, as I understand it, suggests that learning to use a systematic procedure is far easier than learning to use a list of poorly ordered rules defined by a technical terminology with exceptions and footnotes and meager examples—all made more difficult because a behavioristic response is expected from very uncertain stimuli (the student's own sentences).

Let me illustrate these general remarks on pedagogy with some examples of raising and lowering, punctuation practices that can and should be analyzed and practiced during reading and writing assignments. Reading how a good writer punctuates helps anyone grasp more surely some small yet significant point as well as, on occasion, a major point; and such study will thus help anyone punctuate more tellingly. So, consider what some good writers have done.

The following is raising to a comma (the fourth one) where a handbook asks for zero because the compounding is not of independent clauses:

(57) The business of being out for a walk, coming across something of fascinating interest and then dragged away from it by a yell from the master, like a dog jerked onwards by the leash, is an important feature of school life, and helps to build up the conviction, so strong in many children, that the things you most want to do are always unattainable.—George Orwell

This sentence, with its long independent clause with three commas, would become confusing if zero were used at the major point of separation within the sentence, even though zero would follow the handbook rule. Raising thus is important for clarity of meaning.

Raising from zero to a comma is common because it produces a simple yet clear emphasis, as in this:

(58) I was driving down the Thruway in Vermont to consult a doctor in New York, and hit a deer.—Edward Hoagland
The following illustrates raising from commas to periods:

(59) They float on the landscape like pyramids to the boom years, all those Plazas and Malls and Esplanades. All those Squares and Fairs. All those Towns and Dales . . .—Joan Didion

Didion clearly uses raising here to gain emphasis.

The effective sentence fragment also gains emphasis when an expected colon is raised to a period:

(60) I can recall that I hated [Southern black country life] generally. The hard work in the fields, the shabby houses . . .—Alice Walker

When the fragment shows raising from an expected comma, there is—as the system predicts—even more emphasis:

(61) The very name hallucinates. Man's country. Out where the West begins.
—Joan Didion

The first fragment is raised from a colon, the second from a comma.

Teaching the punctuation of fragments and when to use them teaches students how to write—quite different from the usual textbook instruction in how not to write. Teaching how teaches judgment—sensitivity to context—important in the development of taste. How else do we learn that some fragments work and others do not?

Consider an example of lowering, first punctuated as it might have been a hundred years ago and next punctuated as it typically is today:

(62) He searches for the lamppost with his cane, like a tennis player swinging backhand, and, if he loses his bearings and bumps against something, he jerks abruptly back, like a cavalier insulted, looking gaunt and fierce.

(63) He searches for the lamppost with his cane like a tennis player swinging backhand, and if he loses his bearings and bumps against something, he jerks abruptly back like a cavalier insulted, looking gaunt and fierce.—Edward Hoagland

The modern style (comma lowered to zero) better reflects the meaning, better reinforces the meaning, by more clearly reflecting what goes together and what does not. He "searches . . . like a tennis player swinging backhand"—a comma between those words separates what meaningfully goes together. And the same can be said for "he jerks abruptly back like a cavalier insulted." One may be in the habit of marking off such similes with commas—and one has that option, of course—yet it is clear, I think, that the relationship is better expressed without the commas. Moreover, if and is separated from if with a comma, the suggestion is that and relates to "he
jerks abruptly back" (the independent clause); however, *and* is more meaningfully understood as relating all that follows it with all that goes before—the two halves of the sentence.

Lowering is a device that reveals more connection between words, phrases, or clauses than the expected punctuation would; it is most commonly illustrated by lowering from a period to semicolon:

(64) The term “scientific literacy” has become almost a cliché in educational circles. Graduate schools blame the colleges; colleges blame the secondary schools; the high schools blame . . .—Lewis Thomas

A frequent example of lowering is the common violation of the handbook rule that tells us, unless the clauses are short, to use a comma between independent clauses:

(65) They are brimming with good humor and the more daring swell with pride when I stop to speak with them.—James Baldwin

And what effect is achieved in the following by lowering commas to zero?

(66) They asked it in New York and Los Angeles and they asked it in Boston and Washington and they asked it in Dallas and Houston and Chicago and San Francisco. —Joan Didion

Lowering justifies the effective comma splice (and, of course, suggests that teachers teach it). A couple of examples:

(67) But even so [Harvey] had his consolations, he cherished his dream.—Virginia Woolf

(68) I did not know that the British empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it.—George Orwell

Handbooks I have seen do not discuss the problem of punctuating three or more independent clauses as a single sentence, but according to the rule for “punctuating compound sentences” one should use two commas in the following:

(69) The debate might well have been little more than a healthy internal difference of opinion, but the press loves the sensational and it could not allow the issue to remain within the private domain of the movement.—Martin Luther King, Jr.

King, however, was clearly sensitive to the major and minor boundaries and followed the hierarchical principle by lowering (comma to zero) at the minor boundary—accurately reflecting his semantic intent.
A long while ago, in a long-neglected book, George Summey told us what was wrong with style manuals and handbooks: "The notion that there is only one correct way of punctuating a given word pattern is true only in limited degree. Skillful writers have learned that they must make alert and successful choices between periods and semicolons, semicolons and commas, and commas and dashes, dashes and parentheses, according to meaning and intended emphasis" (4). By teaching raising and lowering, we will be adding to our students' repertoire of skills; we will be encouraging students to clarify the meaning of sentences and to gain intended emphasis. Such instruction illustrates what in our composition classes we like to proclaim but don't always demonstrate: writing is thinking.

Acknowledgments: I want to thank Pat Belanoff and Joseph Williams for many valuable comments on the drafts of this manuscript; and I want especially to thank Jim Sledd for his original comments and ongoing support.

Notes

1. "Good" writers is in reference to nonfiction by writers of recognized stature, whose work can be found in college readers. If fiction were included, the evidence would be only more evident. For more on this topic, see my Rethinking Punctuation.  

2. Functional marks are those marks regularly and typically used to mark syntactic functions. I neglect parentheses, perhaps too arbitrarily, but unlike the other marks, parentheses are limited to pairs, giving them a unique and typically non-rhetorical function, suggesting that the primary use of parentheses is for "non-text" information.  

3. For plentiful and convincing diachronic evidence for the claim that the basic unit in prose is the independent clause and that the sentence is simply one way to mark this clause, the reader should see Levinson's dissertation (1985) and derived article (1989).  

4. Subordinate conjunctions are not used to join independent clauses; they form "dependent" elements (phrases or clauses), elements which function as the attachments in patterns I, II, and III—and are punctuated accordingly. Similarly, conjunctive adverbs are simply dependent words and phrasal words ("on the other hand") that function as the same kinds of attachments: "However, they played the next day" (pattern I). "They played the next day, however" (pattern II). "They played, however, the next day" (pattern III).

Works Cited