



What the Dickens! One Writer's Choices in the 19th Century

You are now going to look at the choices made by another writer, this time the famous 19th-century novelist, Charles Dickens. Dickens' writing is particularly interesting to study because he was often very experimental and playful in the way that he wrote.

Here, you will also see that choices in writing can even extend to small aspects of grammar such as punctuation.



A Focus on Punctuation

Pick up any two different editions of the same book by Charles Dickens and you might have a slightly modified reading experience: different editions are rarely punctuated in the same way. The reason for this lies with Dickens himself and the way he used punctuation.

Punctuation for Dickens was a guide to how his work should be read out loud. So as he travelled far and wide reading his novels to large crowds, he would often mark changes to the punctuation in the margins of his copies to suit the effect he wanted to have on his audience. Several versions then survived and different editors have drawn on different ones.

- With a partner, punctuate the passage from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, reproduced on page 15, in a way that would make it come to life when read out loud. It comes from the very start of the novel and introduces readers to the narrator, Pip.
- Look at how you have punctuated the passage compared to Dickens himself (see pages 16-17).
- Identify two differences between your punctuation and Dickens' and discuss how these make a difference to reading the passage.



my fathers family name being pirrip and my christian name philip my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than pip so I called myself pip and came to be called pip I give pirrip as my fathers family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister mrs joe gargery who married the blacksmith as I never saw my father or my mother and never saw any likeness of either of them for their days were long before the days of photographs my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones the shape of the letters on my fathers gave me an odd idea that he was a square stout dark man with curly black hair from the character and turn of the inscription also georgiana wife of the above I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly

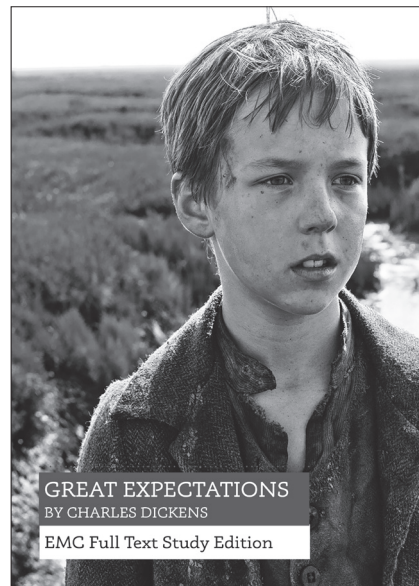
KS3 LANGUAGE LABORATORY

A Focus on Sentences

- With a partner, read the passage below, which extends the one you looked at for punctuation. Read it quite quickly and focus on looking at the sentences, rather than their actual meaning. When you have finished, complete the tasks below.
 - ▶ Find the longest sentence. How many words does it contain? What are your thoughts about this sentence?
 - ▶ Find the shortest sentence. How many words does it contain? What are your thoughts about this sentence?
 - ▶ Estimate what percentage of the sentences are over 10 words long, and what percentage are 10 words or fewer. (For example, 90% 10 words or fewer, 10% over 10 words.)

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister — Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,' I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine — who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle — I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.



Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!'

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

'O! Don't cut my throat, sir,' I pleaded in terror. 'Pray don't do it, sir.'

'Tell us your name!' said the man. 'Quick!'

'Pip, sir.'

'Once more,' said the man, staring at me. 'Give it mouth!'

'Pip. Pip, sir.'