

# The Oakland Tribune

## Punctuation: finally, it gets a day, if you haven't heard

**By Jill Tucker**

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Jeff Rubin used to mark punctuation problems in newspapers with a red pen and send them back to the editors.

Then the Pinole man spent four years in a Type A behavior modification class (really) and so he doesn't do that anymore.

Yet his obsession with proper punctuation never waned and he despaired the loss of accuracy in a world filled with haphazard e-mail and Instant Messaging.

He felt like this:

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Then he had an idea.

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National Punctuation Day was born.

Starting today, Aug. 22 will now and forever be the one day each year to celebrate semicolons, hype hyphens and grab colons with complete disregard to how it might look to passers-by.

Lest anyone feel alone in their desire to properly punctuate, consider the sales of a small book entirely about punctuation.

Here and in England, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Approach to Punctuation*, by Lynne Truss, is a chart-topper.

The book is part diatribe, part instruction in proper usage and a call to arms to take up the fight to save punctuation.

"To those who care about punctuation, a sentence such as 'Thank God its Friday'" (without the apostrophe) rouses feelings not only of despair but of violence," Truss writes. "If you still persist in writing, 'Good food at it's best', you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave."

(American punctuation sticklers will note that the comma in the above quote should be inside the quotation marks, but it's a British book in British style.)

The writer spends a good deal of the book on the difference between its and it's and the general use of the apostrophe for plural possessive — apparently pet peeves.

In an interesting side note, Truss notes that the English language adopted the apostrophe in the 16th century.

"I apologise (sic) if you know all this, but the point is many, many people do not," she writes after a particularly lengthy explanation on proper usage. "Why else would they open a large play area for children, hang a sign saying 'Giant Kid's Playground', and then wonder why everyone stays away from it? (Answer: everyone is scared of the Giant Kid.)"

The truth is, punctuation matters.

Earlier this year, days after San Francisco started issuing marriage licenses to gay couples, Superior Court Judge James Warren refused to stop the weddings in part because of a punctuation problem in the lawsuit filed by those opposed to the proceedings.

The lawyers had put a semicolon instead of the word “or.”

“I am not trying to be petty here, but it is a big deal....” Warren said. “That semicolon is a big deal.”

Pinole’s Rubin logged onto the *Chase’s Calendar of Events* Web site and submitted his idea in 2002. Ultimately, the folks there who decide on which days get selected to appear in the annual tome, gave the nod to National Punctuation Day ([www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com)) starting with 2004.

Punctuation, however, has to share the 24 hours of recognition with the Tooth Fairy, who also has her own day, but thankfully the highly anticipated National Spongecake Day falls one day later.

Rubin said the idea to create a national holiday originally started out as a way to get free publicity for his newsletter company ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)).

But in the last two years, it has become more than that, he said.

The man is now on a mission.

“Writing skills in general and punctuation skills in particular are abysmal,” he said. “I think it’s the sign of a lazy lifestyle.”

Rubin is attacking the problem head on: He’s making T-shirts.

In one design, he has replaced the heads of the apostles in a picture of the Last Supper with apostrophes and the words, “Jesus and the 12 apostrophes.”

“That’s sure to anger the religious right,” he said.

Rubin chose Aug. 22 because it falls on his birthday and will therefore be easy for him to remember.

Celebrating his 54th birthday today, he plans to have a cake in the shape of an exclamation point; party favors, including question marks to twirl around one’s finger; and Dippin’ Dots ice cream for periods and ellipses.

“We haven’t come up with anything for a comma yet,” he said in all seriousness. “We might have to break apart some pretzels.”

Rubin apparently has a kindred spirit in Britain. John Richards started the Apostrophe Protection Society in 2001 and has since received tens of thousands of e-mails and letters from all over the English-speaking world.

“There is a deep and unexpected love of apostrophes, mixed with anger at their misuse,” Richards wrote in an e-mail. “Many people even carry marker pens and adhesive paper to make corrections.”

He was thrilled to hear Americans were joining his appreciation for the apostrophe and other assorted punctuation marks.

“Congratulations to the USA for holding a National Punctuation Day,” he wrote. “I hope a great many people observe it.”

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