

## Pinole: Editorially challenged make punctilious punctuator see red



By [C.W. Nevius](#)

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Jeff Rubin is a sick man. He knows it. He's battling the affliction. But he isn't going to win. He can't help himself. When he sees a misplaced apostrophe he is powerless to resist the urge to set off the punctuation alarm.

"It's a disease. It really is," Rubin says. "Some people don't appreciate it. And they appreciate it even less when I point it out. They say, 'Enough is enough. I understand that I have a deficiency. So do you. How would you like it if I pointed it out to you?' "

We all have little quirks and minor transgressions that set us off: 20 items in the 15-item checkout line or loud cell-phone conversations in public places. But for Rubin it can be as simple as a comma. He is the apostle of the apostrophe and feels compelled to spread the word.

"A comma is not a state of being," reads one of the shirts Rubin has for sale. (comma-coma, get it?) Another says, "A semi-colon is not a surgical procedure."

Rubin came by his devotion honestly. The Pinole resident has worked as a newspaper writer and tough, strict, and sometimes grouchy editors impressed on him the importance of getting it right. (Not like our editors here at *The Chronicle* by the way, who want to get it right but are as cheerful, supportive and understanding as the day is long.)

When Rubin left his career as an ink-stained wretch, he founded a company to create newsletters for businesses called The Newsletter Guy ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)). Now 23 years in the business, he can still be riled to a rant when he considers the punctuation blunders he's seen at the highest rungs of the corporate ladder.

"It is the sign of a lax education," Rubin insists. "There are stylebooks, you know. They are very easy to read. When I get mail from a vendor who wants my business that is riddled with punctuation errors, it makes me think it is an indication of a sloppy lifestyle."

Wow. And here you thought you were just having a little trouble remembering if the comma goes before or after the date. If this is going to be a lifestyle referendum, we'd better watch our p's and q's. (There should be apostrophes there, shouldn't there?)

Indeed, a librarian wrote Rubin in support of his punctuation crusade but added, "Every time I send you a note, I tremble." That's just silly, Rubin says. No need to be so concerned. But, deep down, you can tell he kind of likes it.

Without question, the little rule of punctuation that is most likely to set him off is the difference between "it's" and "its." The it's-its distinction is definitely one that can cause tiny beads of sweat to appear. We all know we should know how it works, and

we're probably too embarrassed to ask for help, but we also know that there's someone like Rubin looking over our shoulder, waiting for an "aha!" moment.

The problem is that it's is counter-intuitive. We know that apostrophes are used to show possession so we plug one in when we write "grabbing it's paw..." At which point Rubin leaps off the couch and prepares to write a scolding memo.

The rule, he explains (and not for the first time), "Is if it translates to 'it is' then 'it's' is correct."

The problem is, once we've realized we have an apostrophe problem, it begins to feed on itself. Family names, for example, are a consistent source of errors. Rubin says he walks by a house near his home where the family — let's call them the Johnsons — have a mailbox that reads, "The Johnson's."

"Always wonder, 'The Johnson's what?'" Rubin says.

Rubin also campaigns against an affliction this column has struggled to control — serial comma abuse. This comes from those of us who simply cannot resist tossing in a comma from time to time just to break things up. (In fact, we almost put a comma between "time" and "just" in that sentence.

"It's like," Rubin says, "I ran out of breath so I should put a comma in. "

Basically, unless you are profoundly interested in punctuation you don't want to get Rubin started. Have you heard of the recent best-selling grammar book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, which is billed as "the zero tolerance approach to punctuation"?

"The first punctuation mistake is on page two," Rubin says.

He also worries about a generation that is growing up typing in the oddly abbreviated cell-phone text messages and Internet instant messages.

Something, he says, must be done. Someone must take action. And so, you will not be surprised to hear, he has. Rubin has applied for, and been granted, a national holiday. The first "National Punctuation Day" ([www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com)) is Aug. 22. And why that day?

"It's my birthday," Rubin says.

It figures. The man was born to promote punctuation.

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