

## Kay's Comments

By Kay Lapp James

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Did you mind your p's and q's Monday? If minding your p's and q's is a reference to learning to write or printing correctly — two meanings of the obscure adage — then Monday was the day to do so. It was National Punctuation Day, the second annual celebration stressing the need to punctuate written materials correctly.

Jeff Rubin, of Pinole, Calif., is founder of the day and owner and publisher of a newsletter on writing ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)). He started it to draw attention to proper punctuation.

The Web site ([www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com)), explains the rationale: It's a day for librarians, educators and parents — people who are interested in teaching and promoting good writing skills to their students and their children. It's also a day to remind business people that they are often judged by how they present themselves.

"Successful people have good communication skills, and that includes knowing how to write properly," Jeff says. "Punctuation counts. A misplaced comma can alter the meaning of a message."

Rubin's suggestions for celebrating the day include circling incorrect punctuation in the newspaper. You're welcome to do that. You wouldn't be the first, and although we newspaper folk, wince and cringe when people do this, we appreciate it. Readers telling us what we do wrong is valuable. Editors and reporters who listen to reader complaints, without getting defensive, can improve their writing and the newspaper. It's learning from your mistakes.

Now that I've condoned correcting us, I am sure I will make a punctuation mistake in this column. I hope our copy editor will catch it.

Before you get your red pens out, be aware most newspapers use the *Associated Press Stylebook* for guidance on punctuation. It may differ from what you've been taught. For example many people write a series of items — apples, oranges, and bananas — with a comma before the and. AP says the comma is unnecessary.

Readers will call when they see an egregious mistake and will ask if we have proofreaders. We don't. We have copy editors.

On many papers, copy editors are also page designers who lay out or put together the pages — a job that used to be given to a different department. However, technology now allows pages to be put together or laid out on computer. With the change in technology, most newspaper publishers — always interested in saving bucks — eliminated the separate job, but they didn't add scores of editors or make deadlines later. Copy editors try, but mistakes do creep in. I attribute them to gremlins.

Copy editors don't read ads. That job is left to the graphic designers, classified ad staff, advertising representatives and the businesses or individuals who placed the ad. Classified ads are usually taken over the phone which leaves lots of room for error.

Newspaper people cringe and are shamed when a mistake occurs, but we recover and have laugh. One involving punctuation that brought a smile to my face was a classified ad for a garage sale that listed, "old lady's clothes." It should have read "old ladies clothes."

Rubin also suggested celebrants should: "Take a leisurely stroll, paying close attention to store signs with incorrectly punctuated words. Stop in those stores to correct the owners."

Lynne Truss, who wrote the international bestseller, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, would enjoy that. The title references a wildlife manual and its description of pandas. Pandas don't shoot. They do eat shoots and leaves. A misplaced comma decidedly changes the meaning. If you haven't read the book, you've missed a treat.

Her examples draw from signs she's seen, but she doesn't correct owners. Some business owners might take umbrage if a customer came to say their business sign was incorrect. More likely they would write the person off as a nut. Instead take a photo and send it to the National Punctuation Day Web site.

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