



Rise to the occasion on National Punctuation Day

And remember, the use of semicolons doesn't involve surgery

By Tom Dillon

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It's easier to create a holiday now than it was in the old days. Back then, you had to do something really startling, like being raised from the dead or declaring independence or inviting all the neighborhood Indians to have dinner with you.

Now, all you have to do is get a toll-free phone number, create a Web page, send out lots of letters, print up some T-shirts and wait for the calls and plaudits to start rolling in.

Of course, it helps to have a good cause; some people might think that is the one thing lacking in Jeff Rubin's new holiday observance. But then some people don't know beans about proper use of the English language, or the low levels to which it has fallen.

Rubin, the owner of The Newsletter Guy (www.thenewsletterguy.com), a newsletter publishing company in Pinole, Calif., is the creator, if that's the proper word, of National Punctuation Day. The day will be observed on Monday in Pinole and various other lonely outposts of proper punctuation across the land.

He says 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 communications skills, and that includes knowing how to write properly," Rubin says in his promotional literature. "Punctuation counts. A misplaced comma can alter the meaning of a message."

Rubin said in an interview, half joking, that he came up with the day to save his marriage. "I used to sit at the kitchen table and red-line the newspaper," he said, noting grammar mistakes. "I'd get upset and start cussing, and then my wife would get upset. So I decided I'd create a silly holiday."

Monday, he said, is also his birthday, meaning he's less likely to forget when Aug. 22 rolls around next year.

He doesn't mention it, but he sounds like the kind of language geek who was excited by the U.S. publication last year of Lynne Truss's book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: the Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*.

That book, as you'll probably remember, was a British import that turned one bad

joke into an entire treatise about language. It included such things as Britain's "apostropher royal," and it became a runaway best seller both in Britain and the United States.

Truss concluded with the rallying cry, "Sticklers, Unite!" And Rubin seems tuned in to her wavelength, though he said she complains too much.

"I'm stunned at how many executives and CEOs send me articles and correspondence that are poorly written and punctuated," he said. "Did they miss a year of school?" He also noted advertising copy and billboards "that scream to be corrected.

"Poor punctuation knows no sociological boundaries," his publicity says. "Everyone from high school dropouts to Ph.D.s needs help with punctuation."

Rubin's Web site, www.nationalpunctuationday.com, contains some handy advice on use of things like the semicolon, ellipsis and so forth. Click on the period, for instance, and you get examples and a definition: A full pause, as is made at the end of a complete sentence."

There are also the requisite puns, like the one that "an ellipsis is not when the moon moves in front of the sun." You can get this and seven others on T-shirts, though they're expensive for many tastes. The T-shirts cost \$25.

Rubin is promoting a worthy cause here, and he does have the day listed with *Chase's Calendar of Events*, the bible for such things. But it's still unclear how we should commemorate the day. He suggests sleeping late, buying a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and circling the punctuation mistakes in the newspaper.

That may help, but the more activities ideas are the only way to ever move toward solving the problem. So you might also pay close attention to store signs on Monday and be sure to notify the owners about any punctuation errors. You can start with Lowes Food Stores, which is missing an apostrophe.

And if you do circle the punctuation mistakes in the newspaper, be sure to send it to the editor. Just don't tell him I said to do it.

More information on National Punctuation Day can be found at www.nationalpunctuationday.com on the Internet or by calling (877) 588-1212.