

# Squiggles, dots, dashes and other stuff

**By Mike Boyd**

Editor

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Jeff Rubin sweats the small stuff — like the preceding dash and the period at the end of this sentence.

The publisher and owner of The Newsletter Guy ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)), a Pinole, Calif.-based newsletter publisher, takes the squiggles and dots and dashes and such that we wrap around words so seriously that he created National Punctuation Day (which in case you didn't know is Aug. 22).

According to [www.NationalPunctuationDay.com](http://www.NationalPunctuationDay.com), NPD is “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.”

Rubin says that knowing how to write well is one of the keys to successful communication, “Punctuation counts,” he says. “A misplaced comma can alter the meaning of a message.”

And if you thought that you were finished worrying about commas and quotes and periods and semicolons when you graduated from the sixth grade, think again.

“I'm stunned at how many executives and CEOs send me articles and correspondence that are poorly written and punctuated,” Rubin says. “Did they miss a year of school? I read ad copy and see billboards that scream to be corrected. Poor punctuation knows no sociological boundaries – everyone from high school dropouts to Ph.D.s needs help with punctuation.”

To that end, I asked Rubin to send me a few do's and don'ts and some reasons why he thinks that proper punctuation matters in business. The do's and don'ts are in the grey box. The following are some of Rubin's reasons “why proper punctuation matters in business.” (I copied and pasted from his e-mail to ensure that I got the punctuation correct.)

- People judge us by the way we present ourselves — how we act, how we look, how we speak and how we write. When we are professional in all of these areas, we get our foot in the door for our choice of college, scholarship, job, promotion or business deal. If you're unprofessional in any of these areas, it can cost you.

- Our written communications reflect our level of professionalism — not education, but professionalism. How we present ourselves through the written word directly affects how people perceive us and whether or not they choose to do business with us.

- The rules of proper punctuation haven't changed just because we've entered the computer age. The casual communication shortcuts of e-mail and text messaging have no place in professional business writing, where words wield power and decision-makers form impressions immediately. Clarity and attention to detail are imperative; consistently careless punctuation mistakes cost time, money and productivity.

- **Style.** Style is the way you present yourself to others. It's the way you dress, the way you walk, the way you enter a room, the way you shake hands, the way you speak and the way you write. Writing style is the way you use words, grammar and punctuation; your writing style says a lot about your business style. What's your style? Are you thoughtful, accurate and attentive to detail? Are you confident, strong and decisive? Or, are you sloppy and careless – either through ignorance or laziness? If your writing is sloppy and careless, what does that say about your business practices, products and services? Will clients and associates want to do business with someone who's sloppy and lazy? If you don't care about your words, why should they? People will choose to do business with people who make powerful and commanding impressions through the written word.

- **Professionalism.** The use of proper punctuation in your written communications establishes positive environments for professional relationships with clients, colleagues, employees and supervisors. Clients and associates take you seriously and welcome opportunities to work with you when they see you can deliver your messages with power, clarity and precision. They equate your ability to communicate effectively with your ability to deliver products and services with equal success.

- **Respect for the reader.** You demonstrate respect for your readers when you write in a carefully crafted, reader-friendly manner. Poorly punctuated copy confuses readers, and makes them work through convoluted sentences and unclear messages. That may cost you a client, a sale or a job. Your properly punctuated communications engage your readers and escort them through your communications, making them feel comfortable with you as a professional.

- **Clarity and accuracy.** Properly placed commas, apostrophes and periods ensure clear and thoughtful writing, and reduce the chances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, which can lead to costly mistakes. Proper punctuation is particularly keen in proposals and contracts that involve finances, property and legal issues and responsibilities.

- **Significant to success.** In some instances, written communications are your strongest or only opportunity to make your case – such as a purchase agreement, a binding contract, a grant request, a plea for financial support or a critical endorsement. In these cases, proper punctuation is significant to success, and is the tool that enhances your writing and moves you close to that success.

- **Global audience.** Today's global economy opens business doors around the country and around the world, allowing professionals to conduct high-level negotiations and business activities without leaving the office or meeting face to face. In some cases, colleagues and clients may know you only through your writing. To be competitive and the vendor of choice, you need to present yourself in the most favorable light. Your written communications must be powerful, clear and success-oriented.

- **Position of power and confidence.** Knowing the rules of grammar and punctuation and using them consistently in all written communications — from formal proposals to everyday e-mails — make you a strong, confident writer and communicator. Punctuation ignorance and carelessness translate into timid, weak and potentially disastrous commu-

nications. When your clients and associates find you engaging and trustworthy to read, they will most likely discover how engaging and trustworthy you are to work with, as well.

Still think it really doesn't matter?

Rubin related a few examples of how poor punctuation can be costly in the real world.

One involved a legal case in San Francisco. The paperwork, he said, contained so many errors that the judge threw the case out.

The other might hit closer to home if you own or operate a business.

A library in California commissioned an artist to produce a mural that featured the names of historical figures. When all was said and done, Rubin said, several of the notable names were misspelled.

The artist balked at fixing the mural, he said, claiming artistic license. The mural was eventually corrected, Rubin said, but the artist admitted that the negative publicity surrounding the misspellings had cost her business.

So what's the moral of the punctuation parables? I'll leave that to the founder of National Punctuation Day.

"Not being careful with spelling and punctuation can cost you money."

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