

# The Courier

## Let's be punctual California man founds 'holiday' to call attention to need for proper grammar

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Are your participles dangling? Is your infinitive split? Heaven forefend, has your comma been spliced?

You may have missed it, but Monday — National Punctuation Day — was the day to fix all that.

Jeff Rubin of Pinole, Calif., founded the “holiday” in 2004 to draw attention to the importance of proper punctuation and to celebrate the lowly comma, correctly used quotes and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipsis.

Rubin, owner and publisher of The Newsletter Guy ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)), a newsletter publishing company, said he started the day to save his marriage.

“Every morning I would sit at the kitchen table to read the paper with a red pen in my hand,” recalled Rubin. “I’m an ex-newspaper man, and I would red-line the paper. It would look like I popped a vein. I was screaming and cussing, and my wife would look over in her most loving voice say, “You know I don’t like you talking that way in front of me.”

National Punctuation Day then became a way for Rubin to channel his frustration and anger into something positive, a “silly holiday,” as he calls it.

As a businessman who has received articles from CEOs and management in a variety of companies, Rubin has seen a need for his holiday.

“(Grammar skills) have gone down a lot,” he noted. “Writing skills have deteriorated in general. Not only the quality of the writing, but there is more poor punctuation, bad sentence structure everywhere. I’m alarmed at the copy I receive from CEOs and senior managers.”

Students today don’t seem to be in possession of possessive knowledge either.

“Students tend to make mistakes with possessives. They’ll confuse ‘its’ and ‘it’s’ all the time and ‘your’ and ‘you’re,’ said Cathy Dunham, an 11th grade English teacher at Findlay High School. “It’s just a casual approach to grammar.”

One of the exercises Dunham uses is to pluck 30 sentences with incorrect grammar or punctuation from students’ first essay of the year.

“I write them on the board,” she explained. “Often one kid or two kids can point out the corrections, and we use that to learn a lot about grammar and punctuation.”

Even teacher can find themselves the victims of poor punctuation. One of Rubin’s first

pieces of correspondence regarding the holiday came from a school librarian in Florida, bemoaning how little grammar education her students received — with two significant capitalization and punctuation errors in her letter.

“What I see most often is that it’s just not being taught as much,” Dunham said. “And kids are reading less often, so they don’t see punctuation and how it’s used properly. They have the basics of it, but don’t seem interested in really getting it.”

Both Dunham and Rubin believe the Internet, particularly the speed and the casualness of that method of communication, has contributed to the decline of punctuation propriety.

It’s just not school children who need to learn the dos and don’ts of punctuation, confirmed Rubin.

“I’m stunned at how many executives and CEOs send me articles and correspondence that are poorly written and punctuated,” Rubin stated. “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.”

According to a study of college writing patterns by Andrea Lunsford, author of *Everyday Writer*, more than half of the top 20 writing errors were punctuation problems, including missing commas after an introductory element, missing commas in compound sentences, wrong or missing verb endings, missing or misplaced possessive apostrophes and unnecessary commas.

The world of periods and semicolons is not random.

“There are very few rules that don’t have a reason for them,” Dunham state. “It’s been a pleasure to pay attention and discover that there’s almost always a good reason for these rules. The best reason is for clarity of expression, really. People’s meanings can otherwise be misinterpreted.”

For example, commas are usually used to indicate a natural pause or a division in a sentence, and a misplaced or absent comma can change the entire meaning of a sentence. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* plays on this – removing the comma changes the meaning from a series of actions to something a panda might do.

Dunham also noted that some rules have evolved over time. Some punctuation and grammatical questions that are of little or no concern today used to be perceived as extremely important. For example, in all but the most formal writing, it is now permissible to begin a sentence with “and” or “but.”

“(My students and I) also have quite a long discussion about why it’s important to have good grammar and good punctuation skills. First, because people will think you’re stupid,” Dunham noted. “”In the professional world, most people first get to know you through your writing, and they will judge you through your writing. I have a friend in human resources in Cincinnati. The first thing she sees is the cover letter, and if it has too many errors, they just toss it.

Unfortunately, the errors continue into adult life.

“People never know when to put a period inside or outside quotation marks,” noted Kay Hochstettler, an English teacher at Findlay High School. “Periods and commas go inside quotation marks – I’ve even seen them used incorrectly in national publications or on Jeopardy.”

For people interested in improving their skills, Rubin suggested buying a stylebook, such as the classic *The Elements of Style* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Rubin also

offers several punctuation tips and suggestions on his Web site,  
[www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com).

“The saddest thing is that people will accept that they are poor spellers, bad grammarians,” Rubin remarked. “I think it’s too bad people accept that when they can improve those skills and make a better impression on people. Punctuation can be learned; it’s not a genetic deficiency.”

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