

# The Free Lance-Star

## In praise of the proper apostrophe It's National Punctuation Day!

August 22, 2005

In praise of the proper apostrophe (or: Down with 'The Smith's')

WHEN YOU SEE a sign that reads "No Dog's Allowed," do you feel like biting someone? Do you cringe over curiously placed commas, proliferating exclamation points, and seriously unjustified semicolons?

Today is your day. Take a deep breath, and let your Inner Stickler run free. It's National Punctuation Day ([www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com)), and may the King's English be better for it.

Punctuation. Really just a group of printer's marks to assist readers, the little dots and squiggles have developed a life of their own lately. They've escaped their ordained positions on the page, aided especially by the loosey-goosey Internet and its anything-goes e-mail "style." It's high time we lasso the little blighters and get 'em back under control.

After all, in English, at least, there are only 13 marks to worry about. Observe: It's not really that hard to mind your punctuation p's and q's assuming, of course, you understand — and who doesn't? — that the point is to ease communication; [punctuation's] "primary function is to resolve structural uncertainties in a text," says Malcolm Parkes, however willy-nilly the Internet (and e-mail!) has encouraged us to become.

Perhaps, though, taking on all 13 is a bit too much, rather like trying to consume doughnuts *and* bagels *and* English muffins at breakfast. Instead, let us savor just one: the apostrophe.

Lynne Truss, in her best-selling book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, likens the apostrophe to a busy woman, racing to and fro, multitasking like mad. It indicates missing letters (can't), the possessive (Tom's cat), the plural possessive (the Joneses' cats), time (in a week's time), the omission of figures in dates (the '60s), nonstandard English ("away wi' ye"), Irish names (O'Brien), and the plurals of letters (a's and b's). Whew!

Most problematic is the use of the apostrophe in "its." It's not used for the possessive. So, when one buys a poorly built table: Its legs are too long; it's time to cut them down. Think "it is" and apply an apostrophe. Otherwise, don't. Likewise, in simple plural constructions, leave it out: No Dogs Allowed is proper, unless you mean No Dog's Hair (or Barking or Leash) is Allowed.

Confused? Ms. Truss consoles us by noting that the "Oxford Companion to English Literature" says, "There never was a golden age in which the rules for the possessive apostrophe were clear-cut and known, understood and followed by most educated people." Local residents can offer as evidence our own oddity: In Spotsylvania County, Eley's Ford Baptist Church is on Ely's Ford Road near Eleys Ford.

Nevertheless, let's gird our loins and prepare for battle: This year, the apostrophe; next year, the comma. Meanwhile, hug your favorite punctuation mark today.