

Point out punctuation problems?

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Daily Inter Lake Columnist

August 21, 2005

Of course!

If the above sign taken at a health club doesn't make you cringe, doesn't make you ask — "Why does only one member get to testify?" — then you may not appreciate this column.

You probably won't be celebrating the second annual National Punctuation Day on Monday, either. The photo of the above sign was e-mailed to me from Jeff Rubin (his hand is pictured with the sign), the founder of the annual holiday meant to bring out everyone's inner punctuator.

National Punctuation Day, as featured in *Chase's Calendar of Events*, is officially "A celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotes, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipses." (National Punctuation Day will be moved to Sept. 24 next year so teachers can take advantage of the event.)

In a phone interview from his San Francisco-area home, Rubin said he came up with the idea as "a gut reaction to all the poor punctuation I saw. It was a way to bring it to the public's consciousness."

On his Web site, www.nationalpunctuationday.com, Rubin has a few hints for observing the holiday in a stress-free manner. "Don't overdo it," he warns.

His punctuation-day itinerary includes these suggestions:

"Sleep late. Go out for coffee and a bagel (or two). Read a newspaper and circle all of the punctuation errors you find (or think you find but aren't sure) with a red pen. Take a leisurely stroll, paying close attention to store signs with incorrectly punctuated words. Stop in those stores to correct the owners. If the owners are not there, leave notes. Take a nap. It's been a long day."

Rubin is an award-winning newsletter publisher (www.thenewsletterguy.com), so he knows the value of a properly placed apostrophe.

The most common mistakes he sees are the random mixing of it's, a contraction that means "it is" and its, a possessive term. (One of the punctuation-themed T-shirts sold on Rubin's Web site says "It's not possessive." There's also "A comma is not a state of being," and "... An ellipsis is not when the moon moves in front of the sun.")

He's also bothered by the increasing and incorrect practice of putting an apostrophe before the "s" when creating a plural.

Rubin is disturbed enough at times to bring the mistakes to the attention of the offending parties, though he pays socially for his obsession.

“Sometimes people think I’m anal. They make fun of me. They tell me ‘I don’t point out all of your shortcomings.’”

But he persists, nevertheless.

“I’m never aggressive about it. I try to be gentle. The response out here in California is a little kinder than if I was back in my hometown in New York City. I think there would be some stronger language and possibly physical abuse.”

Despite the proliferation of poorly punctuated signs, Rubin said there are still signs of hope.

He has been besieged by requests for newspaper interviews and television and radio appearances, and he said most people aren’t calling because they think it’s quirky — they actually care.

“They’re interested in punctuation and are much chagrined at what they see.”

Why focus on creating a better world for punctuation? He explains his reasoning on his Web site.

“I’m stunned at how many executives and CEOs send me articles and correspondence that are poorly written and punctuated. 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.Ds needs help with punctuation.”