

KILLEEN DAILY HERALD

Better than ever!

Today's a day for celebratin' punctuation

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At first glance, National Punctuation Day seems like the world's most bizarre holiday. Period.

Founded in 2004 by Jeff Rubin, the day is meant to draw attention to the importance of proper punctuation, both for students and working professionals. Rubin — the owner/publisher of The Newsletter Guy (www.thenewsletterguy.com), a newsletter publishing company based out of Pinole, Calif. — was motivated to create National Punctuation Day (www.nationalpunctuationday.com) after noting the number of errors found in everything from memos to magazines.

"I would sit down and look at the newspaper and mark it up with red pen," Rubin said. "I just got very distressed at what I was seeing and thought, 'How can I channel this frustration and anger so I can change it?' so then I thought, 'I'll start a silly holiday.'"

Although the day was founded to emphasize proper grammatical skills, "silly" seems just as appropriate an adjective as "serious." After all, the mere mention of National Punctuation Day can't help but spur talk of kooky commas or puzzling parentheses. And of all the misused punctuation that makes Rubin bristle, the incorrect application of apostrophes is No. 1.

"I think it's the use of 'it's,' using a contraction for the possessive form, which would just be 'its,'" Rubin said. "I see that everywhere — on billboards, advertising, newspapers, magazines, correspondence I get from some of my customers."

Mary Garrett, the manager of Century Signs in Killeen, deals with punctuation on a large scale — literally. As someone who must create signs for her customers, her eye has become trained to catch poor grammar, spelling and punctuation. Just driving around town, Garrett said, she notices businesses sporting signs with improper punctuation.

"One of the most common things I see is 'your' instead of 'you're.' I see it all the time," Garrett said. "And then there are those people who never use commas and others who use commas between every fourth word."

Garrett's biggest pet peeve should be familiar to anyone who uses the ubiquitous and punctuation degrading, electronic mailing system.

"I hate how people use to create smiley faces in their e-mails," Garret said. "Stop using the colon and parentheses for that."

Cleatus Rattan, the Mayborn Chair professor of English at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, said that after 40 years of teaching, he's never surprised by punctuation usage.

“It’s just simply a strange subject,” he said. “Punctuation is an absolute necessity. I think that’s a given.”

He said that of any form of punctuation, the semicolon is the one he sees misused the most.

“Semicolons are an enormous problem. There was an episode of ‘Seinfeld’ where Elaine wanted to use the semicolon all the time until her boss told her to stop. I kept nodding throughout the entire episode,” Rattan said. “And the exclamation point seems a little unnecessary and overused. It comes after the fact. If I’m going to use an exclamation point, I’d want to use it at the beginning or middle of a sentence, to let readers know the sentence is important.”

In an age where text messaging and e-mail have become a way of life, spelling, punctuation and capitalization seem to have fallen by the wayside. Whether purposefully or not, punctuation often appears to take a back seat to brevity.

“I have a couple of friends of mine, Ivey Leaguers, who take great delight in not punctuating their e-mail,” Rattan said. “They’re like two rebellious little boys trying to show that punctuation isn’t that important.”

But for Rubin, the day proves every period and comma are absolutely indispensable. Still, that doesn’t mean he plans to do anything too out of the ordinary to celebrate.

“I’m going to sleep late, then I’m going to get a bagel and mark up the local paper,” Rubin said. “I’m going to walk around the shopping center and take pictures of all the stores with signs that have punctuation errors and post them to the Web site. Then I’ll probably write a friend an error-free letter. And then I’ll take a nap.”

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