

## Celebrating the commas, apostrophes and question marks inside us all

**By Jude Seymour**

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NORWICH — A Pinole, Calif. man joked Friday that he founded National Punctuation Day to save his marriage.

"I'd read the paper. And I'd be cursing and marking it with a red pen. It looked like I had popped an artery," said Jeff Rubin, the owner of a newsletter publishing company called The Newsletter Guy ([www.thenewsletterguy.com](http://www.thenewsletterguy.com)). His wife, he said, did not appreciate the negative energy that permeated the household in the morning. "I thought, 'How can I channel this aggression, anger and disappointment into something positive?'"

Last year, he founded National Punctuation Day ([www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com)) to draw attention to the downward spiral of bad punctuation, bad spelling and bad grammar. The date he chose when submitting his successful application to *Chase's Calendar of Events* was his birthday: Aug. 22.

"One of the things that frustrates me the most is people accepting the fact that they are bad spellers," the 55-year-old said. "All of these things — they're not genetic disorders. They're not passed down from generation to generation."

As a former journalist and self-employed publisher, Rubin said he's continually surprised by correspondence from potential clients that demonstrates poor punctuation.

"If you're going to a business mixer, you're not going to it in a T-shirt, shorts and sandals," he said, "It's the same thing in writing. If you were a college graduate applying for a job ... and you wrote a cover letter that was full of errors, where do you think your resume would go? I think it would go right to the bottom of the pile. These are very important skills to have. I think when you write well, it shows people that you're serious about success."

Rubin is not alone. Journalist and novelist Lynn Truss released *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* in April 2004 to a fair amount of acclaim. Other books about punctuation soon followed, steadily filling best-seller lists.

"It's gratifying to see all these books," Rubin said. "It would be nice if people read them and actually paid attention to them."

The Pinole resident said mistakes are perpetuated when people in positions of influence, like teachers, make terrible judgments about punctuation and spelling.

Rubin said last year he received correspondence from a librarian in Florida about a National Punctuation Day event.

“In the e-mail she was telling me, ‘Mom’s and Dad’s were also present,’” he said. “I thought, ‘My God. Here’s a librarian and she’s teaching reading skills. And she doesn’t know how to punctuate.’”

Rubin said individuals who see bad punctuation should take steps to correct it. But he acknowledged that most people don’t appreciate even a gentle hint.

“It’s distressing to me that people don’t care, because it’s the way you present yourself to the public,” he said.

Although she considers herself more a grammarian than a top-notch punctuator, Norwich resident Joan Spicer said she’s also concerned about every punctuation and spelling faux pas.

“I think a great deal has to do with the computer,” she said. Shortcuts in informal writing, like substituting the number 8 for “ate” are teaching children bad habits, she said.

“That wouldn’t have passed in the Declaration of Independence,” Spicer added.

The Norwich resident also believes that grammar and punctuation aren’t being stressed enough in the school curriculum.

“If you’re saying, ‘I aint’ got no,’ I don’t care if you are Ph.D. or a Rhodes scholar, you sound uneducated,” she said.

Spicer said standards used to be a lot more unforgiving. She can recall a time when three spelling mistakes in a paper guaranteed an automatic failing grade from the instructor.

The Norwich resident said she doesn’t read the paper looking for mistakes, but said the errors “leap out” at her on the page.

“They put an ad in the *Pennysaver* saying, ‘Canasawacta Country Club is now open to the pubic. Come in and enjoy the view,’” she recalled. “Everyone enjoyed that. And I think it drew a great deal more attention than if it had said ‘public.’”

Janet Schmelzer of Pittsfield said the organization she belongs to encourages her to submit bad punctuation or unconscionable phraseology for its newsletter.

She’s a member of The Society for the Preservation of English Language and Literature (SPELL). The organization promotes proper usage of the English language by sending out “goof cards” to individuals who make ghastly errors.

Schmelzer said she found her organization on the Internet, after reading about the more popular Apostrophe Society, a Protection group that protects the English language’s “much abused punctuation mark.”

The Pittsfield resident said she’s only sent out two goof cards in four years, one of which landed on the desk of Sun staff writer Jeffrey Morse about a month ago when he confused “affected” with “effected.”

But a quote from another *Gazette* article by Jude Seymour found a place in SPELL’s hallowed “Murderer’s Row” newsletter segment. Schmelzer said a quote from a local public official in a May 2003 article was picked as one of the month’s best bastardizations of the English language.

The offending verse? “I don’t think we need it as an egress in, but it still needs to be an egress out.”

Both Schmelzer and Spicer said they had never heard of National Punctuation Day. While Schmelzer said she didn’t know how to celebrate, Spicer was a bit cynical about its national significance.

“I think it will attract a great deal of lack of attention,” she said.