

The Oregonian

The apostrophe catastrophe National Punctuation Day points a red pen at the proliferation of sloppy writing

By John Foyston

August 20, 2005

You're an apostrophe, and for all your young life you've wanted to be the best apostrophe the world has ever seen.

You've done crunches until the definition between your rotund body and down-curving tail is perfect; you've studied the grammar classics – Strunk & White, Fowler and all the rest; you've immersed yourself in the fount of fonts until you can switch from times new Roman to Futura Bold quicker than a teen driver can change lanes.

Tomorrow, they're sending you out into the world. Sure, you may end up serving an honorable but dull career in a contraction – that wouldn't be too bad. But you're the best; good enough to hope for a gig as a possessive apostrophe in a phrase such as “Renee Zellweger's slinky silken briefs.” Now that would be a career. . .

But those sweet dreams evaporate in a clang of morning sun. You struggle awake to find yourself glued to a battered plywood sandwich sign in a seedy strip mall in Fresno, Calif. It's early morning, already hot and airless as you try to make out the sun-faded letters around you. Oh no ...your head pounds and you feel as if you've been gut-punched as the words become clear – my god! All that work wasted...

“Fresh doughnut's — \$2.39/doz.”

It's an all-to-common tragedy, says California writer Jeff Rubin. He created National Punctuation Day out of frustration with the heedless punctuation that infests American life: That needlessly possessive “doughnut's” and its hundred million bothers. The use of it's as possessive when it's actually a contraction of it is. The comma splicing two independent phrases where a semicolon would be correct.

Monday is the second National Punctuation Day. “People tend to think that insisting on correct punctuation is nitpicking, but a misplaced comma can completely change the meaning of a sentence,” says Rubin. He's a former newspaperman who now designs and writes newsletters. (His company is The Newsletter Guy — www.thenewsletterguy.com — in Pinole, Calif.) “and people are definitely sloppier. They have this attitude, ‘Oh, you know what I meant.’”

Rubin well knows that precision is crucial. Years ago, he wanted to work for a New York City newspaper and sent along his resume and a cover letter in which he misspelled the editor's name. The editor wrote him back to say that if Rubin couldn't get his name right, there was no chance of ever becoming a reporter for his newspaper.

Rubin's National Punctuation Day Web site, www.nationalpunctuationday.com, is a one-stop center for Getting It right. Simply click on the punctuation mark currently mystifying you to read a cogent paragraph or two on its correct employment. He even makes the semicolon understandable to readers who didn't grow up on a steady diet of Victorian novelists.

Rubin does the same for a dozen other punctuation marks and offers links to resources such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*. He also sells T-shirts emblazoned with punctuation symbols and slogans such as "a semicolon is not a surgical procedure" and "... An ellipsis is not when the moon moves in front of the sun."

But we needn't venture as far afield as California to find punctilious punctuators. A couple of years ago, the American Apostrophe Association in Tigard fought a spirited battle for Truth, Justice and the American Way – or at least to persuade Albertsons to do the grammatical thing and add a possessive apostrophe to its signs.

"Our crusade failed miserably," says Roy Paul Nelson, who taught journalism at the University of Oregon for 35 years. "In fact, the company has since removed all apostrophes from its internal documents, name tags and everywhere else."

Nelson formed the American Apostrophe Association with his morning-coffee companion John Benneth, a friend since they were co-editors of the Jefferson High School newspaper six decades ago. The association has slumbered since its tilt at the Albertsonian windmill, but officials roused themselves sufficiently to issue a statement after learning of National Punctuation Day.

"Not being a particularly alert organization, the American Apostrophe Association was unaware of the celebration of a National Punctuation Day," says Nelson, "but we applaud the idea."

("There's also an English group, The Apostrophe Protection Society, www.apostrophe.fsnet.co.uk/. No word on whether they'll deign to recognize this American holiday.)

Marilyn Milani has taught English for 30 years and currently teaches at LaSalle High School in Milwaukie. She says that because teachers are no longer taught correct punctuation, their students aren't either. But hers are: "Communication is faster and sloppier these days," she said, "but when kids pay close attention to punctuation, they pay closer attention to writing in general and the thought that goes into it. Once they know the rules, they can concentrate on style."

Milani plans to celebrate National Punctuation Day by looking through fliers from the Modern Language association for updated punctuation or capitalization rules that she'll pass on to her classes. That, and any "exciting research papers on commas."

Her exact words.

The originator of National Punctuation Day plans to observe it by sleeping late and showering long. Then, over coffee and a bagel, he'll peruse the newspaper and circle errors with a red pen. Then he'll stroll the boulevard, popping into shops to correct errant punctuation and usage in signs – not that the show owners will much care, he says.

Finally, he plans to go home and write an error-free letter to all his friends, and follow that with a nap. Proper punctuation is hard work.

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