



A pointed primer on punctuation marks

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Think an ellipsis is when the moon moves in front of the sun?

When you want to pause for effect in your writing do you put in a whole flock of dots?

Then you need punctuation help. Period.

Lucky for you, Aug. 22 is National Punctuation Day

(www.nationalpunctuationday.com), a registered trademark holiday listed in *Chase's Calendar of Events*. Celebrating "the lowly comma, correctly used quotes, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever mysterious ellipsis," the day was founded by Jeff Rubin, a newsletter publisher and owner of "The Newsletter Guy" (www.thenewsletterguy.com).

So you know how to celebrate July Fourth, Christmas and New Year's Eve. But what does one do to celebrate National Punctuation Day? Here's what Rubin suggests:

- Sleep late.
- Take a long shower or bath.
- 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.
- Visit a bookstore and purchase a copy of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*.
- Look up all the words you circled.
- Congratulate yourself on becoming a better written communicator.
- Go home.
- Sit down.
- Write an error-free letter to a friend.
- Take a nap. It's been a long day.

It's true. Something changes about the way you read the paper when you have a red pen in your hand. If you're like me, you'll waver between feeling self-righteously clever and ridiculously unsure of yourself.

The good news is, your reading comprehension really improves when you pay closer attention to the small details.

Whether or not you decide to celebrate National Punctuation Day, you may want to think about giving your own writing a bit of a makeover. Firm up those sentences, cut off those split infinitives and by all means trim up those unkempt ellipses.

Here's a bit of an ellipsis primer to get you in the mood:

Why do you use it? An ellipsis indicates the omission of letters or words or a pause in thought.

What does it look like? Three evenly spaced dots (a period on your keyboard)

How do you insert it into the text? There should be one space on both sides of an ellipsis.

What if it comes at the end of the text? If the omission comes at the end of a sentence, place the ellipsis after the period, making a total of four dots.... Notice that there is no space between the period and the last character of the sentence.

Examples:

- Finn looked as if he liked black beans ... then spit them out.
- "It might be ..." Sharon said, waveringly.

When in doubt, Rubin has all kinds of great information on commas, brackets, question marks, quotation marks, and semi-colons, too. You can even buy a National Punctuation Day T-shirt.

But if punctuation just isn't your thing, well, don't sweat it. Punctuating isn't everything. As George Prentice once said, "Many writers profess great exactness in punctuation, who never yet made a point." Get it?