



Punctuation: Short-cuts to communication could be costly to your career, your wallet

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Next time you think punctuation isn't important, stop to remember the plight of a Canadian company whose misplaced comma cost it more than \$2 million.

It's not a joke.

Rogers Communications Inc. believed it had contracted with another company, Aliant Inc., to string Rogers' cable lines across thousands of utility poles for a yearly fee of less than \$10 per pole, according to a story in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*.

Thinking the price was contractually locked in for five years, Rogers was shocked when it was notified the contract was canceled and rates were increasing to as much as \$28.05 per pole.

But one comma in one sentence of the 14-page contract made all the difference, the *Globe and Mail* reported.

Take note of comma No. 2: The agreement "shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party."

Were it not for the second comma, Rogers would have had a locked-in price for five years, but the punctuation changed the meaning. The company will probably end up paying about \$2.13 million more due to the error, according to the Canadian newspaper.

Technological advances may have made communication quicker and easier in the 21st century, but it has taken a toll on punctuation and grammar.

"E-mail and text messages are sloppy and they are the decline of Western Civilization as we know it," says Jeff Rubin, an entrepreneur who has been in the newsletter publishing business for 25 years. "It's almost as if young people want to eliminate vowels from written communication."

The founder of National Punctuation Day, Rubin advocates the importance of grammar, punctuation and other writing skills.

The condensed, informal writing style so often used by youth in e-mails and text messages does spill over into written communication, Rubin said, speaking by telephone from his Pinole, Calif., office.

Rubin said many of today's youth do not know how to write well.

"A lot don't know proper punctuation, they can't spell and their grammar usage is atrocious."

“They get into the business world and have to write letters, send resumes and communicate on a professional level, and they can’t do it.”

But, Rubin laments, “it’s not just kids.”

Rubin said he receives correspondence from clients — “highly educated people” — riddled with misspelled words and punctuation errors.

“People don’t understand how they sabotage themselves,” he said. “It makes people think they’re amateurs.”

But if you’re not a Canadian communications company that just lost millions, how important is one little spelling or grammatical error?

Very important, according to Rubin.

A former journalist, Rubin knows how costly such mistakes can be. While working as a rookie reporter in Connecticut, he dreamed of a career at New York’s Newsday. The publisher lived in Connecticut, so Rubin wrote him letter telling him how badly he wanted to work for the newspaper.

“I misspelled his name,” Rubin said, noting the publisher wrote him back with the message, “you’ll never work at Newsday.”

Just recently, Rubin said he was contacted by a human resources manager at an Oregon company who was hiring a new employee. When the resumes came in, all those with incorrect punctuation went straight into the garbage can.

Rubin emphasized that text messaging and e-mail are not formal communications.

“That’s not the kind of communication professionals have with one another,” he said. “It’s OK to be casual, that’s fine, but not in a business setting.”