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Comma sense

Stop! Don't put that apostrophe where it doesn't belong

BY ANGUS LIND

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Lost in the spotlight of a rather enormous extended football weekend, “Monday Night Football” and national media attention was a blip on the radar screen called National Punctuation Day, Sept. 24, billed as “A celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotes and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever mysterious ellipsis.”

Hey, I have no problem setting aside a day for punctuation. We have celebrations for National Feel the Love Day, National Handshake Day, National Hairball Awareness Day, National “She’s Funny That Way” Day — even National Columnists Day — not to mention National Procrastination Week (you need more than a day to honor procrastination).

Only problem is that this column’s observance of National Punctuation Day won’t be punctual, since it’s already past. Whatever. Punctual is boring, anyway.

But all those apostrophes, dashes, question marks, exclamation points, hyphens, brackets and their punctuation cousins need some love and attention. So here goes.

The founder of and chief drum-beater for National Punctuation Day is Jeff Rubin, owner of a newsletter publishing company in California. A former newspaperman, Rubin hypes his effort with humor, asking: “Think an ellipsis is when the moon moves in front of the sun?” “Think a semicolon is a surgical procedure?”

No doubt a lot of people do.

Take possessives, for example. How many times have you driven past summer homes or fishing camps and seen cute little signs that say “The Smith’s” or “Welcome to The Clinton’s”? Or opened up a greeting card with a family picture on it and a caption that says, “Merry Christmas from the Harper’s”?

Too many.

The possessive thing really drives me nuts. It’s a very simple rule about apostrophes that no one seems to get. Basically, it’s this: You do not use apostrophes for noun plurals. If your last name is Nitwit and you’re talking about several members of the Nitwit family, it’s the Nitwits, not the Nitwit’s — because they’re not possessing anything.

Now if you said Harvey Nitwit’s Lear jet or a Nitwit’s 1,000-acre ranch, that would be a different story.

If you don’t think punctuation is important and a powerful tool, see how much it can change the meaning of a sentence:

A college English professor wrote the words “A woman without her man is nothing”

on a chalkboard and asked his students to punctuate it correctly.

Naturally, all the males wrote: “A woman, without her man, is nothing.”

The females, however, wrote: “A woman: Without her, man is nothing.”

So there. Obviously the men were correct. Women ought to stick to commas and forget about those colons.

Then there’s the ongoing inability to figure out the difference between “its” and it’s.” Sure, you can get the meaning whether it’s correct or incorrect usage. But again, the rule is simple:

If it doesn’t translate to “it is,” then use “its” instead of “it’s.”

The Pinheads bowling team celebrated its victory.

It’s a victory for the Pinheads bowling team.

How much simpler can it be? I could be a grammarian — just ask my editors. (Right now, after being resuscitated, they are howling with laughter.)

Now, about that eclipse, er, ellipsis. An ellipsis is three evenly spaced dots (periods) with spaces between the ellipsis and surrounding letters or other marks. You’ve seen it used for effect, for signaling a deliberate pause in dialogue, for example:

Coach: “How’s a beer sound, Normie?”

Norm: “I dunno . . . I usually finish them before they get a word in.”

Effect — that’s what an ellipsis is all about. You also can use it for omitted words in a quotation you’re trying to shorten up and still get the meaning across.

So, if all this motivates you to have a belated celebration of National Punctuation Day, here are a few suggestions:

Sleep late. Take a lazy shower or bath. Go out and get some coffee and beignets or bagels.

Read a newspaper and, with a red pen, circle all of the punctuation errors you find, or think you find but aren’t sure. You can skip red-penning this column because it will be the pinnacle of punctuation perfection.

Take a walk, and check out signs and chalkboards that have punctuation errors. Stop in those stores and tell the owners they are in violation of National Punctuation Day. Leave notes if they are not there. Take pictures.

Congratulate yourself on work well done. Go home. Sit down. Take a nap if you feel like it. You’ve worked hard and it’s been a long day. Period. End of story.