

South Korea

Let's Have a World Punctuation Day

The war against missing apostrophes and errant commas

BY ERIC SHACKLE

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On Sept. 24 the United States is celebrating its third National Punctuation Day. The event is the brainchild of Jeff Rubin, a former Californian newspaperman, now a newsletter designer and writer.

Two years ago, irked by “the heedless punctuation that infests American life” (make that Australian too) he created the first National Punctuation Day, “a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotes and other proper uses of periods [we call them fullstops], semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipsis.”

Teachers, writers and other wordlovers greeted the idea with enthusiasm, and it has grown into a sizeable celebration this year.

Rubin's latest project is Punctuation Playtime, “a 45-minute interactive program of non-stop music and games that teaches proper punctuation in fun ways to students in grades 1-3.”

He says: “Learning is easiest when you're having fun. Children will remember this program and the lessons they learn for a lifetime.”

Americans aren't the only ones who worry about faulty punctuation. It's far too common in Britain, Australia, and many other countries. Let's have a World Punctuation Day!

My friend George Richards was editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald's* “Column 8” for many years. He fought valiantly against the misuse of apostrophes through a nitpicking character he called Apostrophe Man.

These days, George is enjoying retirement, gadding around the world to watch international cricket, but whenever he spots a wayward apostrophe that amuses him he can't resist the temptation to email details to his successor, who is ably continuing the vendetta against errant apostrophes.

By a strange coincidence, Britain's Apostrophe Man is a former journalist named John Richards, but no relation of George Richards. As chairman of the Apostrophe Protection Society (APS), he could join America and Australia in a World Punctuation Day.

He founded the APS in 2001, “with the specific aim of preserving the correct use of this currently much abused punctuation mark in all forms of text written in the English language.”

He used to send a formal letter to his hometown's numerous apostrophe offenders.

“Dear Sir or Madam,” he wrote. “Because there seems to be some doubt about the use of the apostrophe, we are taking the liberty of drawing your attention to an incorrect use. . . We would like to emphasise that we do not intend any criticism, but are just reminding you of correct usage should you wish to put right the mistake.”

Following media publicity, he received more than 500 letters of support, as well as several monetary contributions to his cause.

Derek Snoxall, of West Sussex, wrote: “I applaud the foundation of the Apostrophe Protection Society. This is long overdue and tush to those who say otherwise. I suggest that the misuse of commas be attended to at the same time. On a recent visit to Australia I read in a pub lavatory a notice asking people to refrain from putting, amongst other things, ‘babies, nappies down the toilet.’”

Back in the U.S., Rubin isn’t the sole crusader. A few years ago Roy Paul Nelson, who taught journalism at the University of Oregon for 35 years, and his old buddy John Benneth (they were co-editors of their high school’s newspaper 60 years ago), founded the American Apostrophe Association.

Their ambition was “to persuade Albertsons to do the grammatical thing and add a possessive apostrophe to its signs.” Albertsons operates supermarkets, combination food and drug stores, and warehouse stores.

Nelson said: “Our crusade failed miserably. In fact, the company has since removed all apostrophes from its internal documents, name tags and everywhere else.”

Editor’s Note: Eric Shackle, a retired Sydney journalist, is copy editor of Anu Garg’s “A Word A Day” free newsletter, that U.S. wordsmith Anu Garg emails from Seattle to 600,000 wordlovers in 200 countries.