

## A belated celebration of National Punctuation Day

**BY DENNIS LARUE**

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With all that went on the last Sunday in September, it may have escaped you that it was National Punctuation Day.

It was easy to overlook. September 24 was close to the end of Major League Baseball's regular season and a couple of division races remained in doubt. The National Football League had a full schedule. Browns fans were dejected over the Cleveland football team's one-point loss to the Baltimore Ravens. Steelers fans were equally morose over the Pittsburgh team's loss to the Cincinnati Bengals.

There were no parades with marching bands to mark the third annual National Punctuation Day — no speeches, no presidential proclamation, no mention of it on ABC, CBS, Fox or NBC News, or CNN.

It didn't help that the National Punctuation Day's founder, Jeff Rubin of Pinole, Calif., switched the date of its observance from a date in August to Sept. 24 in hopes that more teachers would notice and encourage their pupils to observe the day with special lessons. Punctuation may be more deserving of its own national holiday than, say, Groundhog Day, Arbor Day, Sweetest Day, or National Bosses' Day. We won't venture how National Punctuation Day compares with New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Flag Day or Labor Day. And certainly not with Thanksgiving or Christmas.

If you have read this far and think punctuation isn't important or doesn't matter, return to the top, remove the commas, periods, hyphen, dash and apostrophes. Then try to make sense of what you read.

Discerning readers may say that what you have read so far makes no sense regardless, but let's not quibble.

A problem we all confront is incorrect and unnecessary punctuation. Unneeded quotation marks abound, as in Puppies "for sale." "Free" kittens. "Fresh" eggs. "Genoa" salami.

The rule for putting words in quotes is to show they are a direct quotation. “Give me liberty or give me death!” shouted Patrick Henry. (Note the exclamation point.) Or to convey irony or an opposite sense of what the reader would normally infer. That bright sunlit day turned out to be the “bleakest” in his life as he climbed the stairs to the scaffold.

Too many can’t distinguish between it’s and its. The former is the contracted form of it is, the latter the possessive of it. Or their, there and they’re. The first is third-person plural possessive, the second refers to a place somewhere away from here, the last is a contracted form of they are. All will pass Spellcheck on your computer.

Indeed, Spellcheck does not alert you to whether you have used a word incorrectly, only if you have misspelled it, something far too many students forget.

We haven’t mentioned hyphens yet. The founder of National Punctuation Day, Jeff Rubin, tongue firmly in cheek, notes, “Punctuation can affect your sex life. Extra marital sex — no hyphen — is what you get in a good marriage. Extra-marital sex — with a hyphen — is what you get outside marriage.”

And he offers the classic of how the choice of punctuation changes the meaning of the relationship between the sexes.

Woman, without her man, is nothing.

Woman. Without her, man is nothing.

As Rubin notes, “People judge us by the way we present ourselves — how we act, how we look, how we speak and how we write. When we are professional in all these areas, we get our foot in the door for our choice of college, scholarship, job, promotion or business deal.”

To help pupils in the first, second and third grades master punctuation, Rubin, a former reporter and copy editor, has written, developed and produced a package for teachers, “Punctuation Playtime.” The package includes a compact disk, a punctuation treasure hunt, relay race and rap song, a take-home activity book filled with punctuation examples, mazes, puzzles, matching games and colorful quizzes to share with parents.

For more information on either National Punctuation Day or Punctuation Playtime, visit [www.nationalpunctuationday.com](http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com).

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