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Catch this: Auburn students punctuate

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You may have missed it, but students at Auburn Elementary School celebrated National Punctuation Day on Monday.

For some [the stately brackets], the fired-up exclamation point!, the oft-confused hyphen — and dash — and that butt of many a joke: the colon, may not be reasons to rejoice.

Not so at Auburn Elementary, where the day began with the refrain of “Punk, punk, punctuation,” rapped by a group of Mrs. Rauschenberger’s fourth-graders and piped into every classroom.

A game of punctuation football came later, and second-graders had a hands-on lesson in which they dressed up as question marks and periods and inserted themselves into sentences.

The “Punctuation Rap” came from the Web site (www.nationalpunctuationday.com) of Jeff Rubin, a former reporter and editor who founded the day in 2004 after becoming frustrated with seeing misplaced and misused marks.

Rubin, who was busy giving radio interviews on his day of days, says poor punctuation has always been an issue, but it seems to be getting worse. And celebrating proper punctuation may help to shed some light on the frequently maligned subject.

Rubin sees poorly written articles and correspondence from executives, CEOs, on billboards and in magazines. But the worst offenders, the Pinole, Calif., resident says, are newspapers, for which he says there is no excuse. Newspapers should know this stuff, said Rubin, perhaps a self-appointed member of the punctuation police.

“Now I’m seeing mistakes in books,” he said. “I can’t remember the last time I picked up a book and did not see an error — sometimes multiple errors.”

And in case anyone should think punctuation isn’t sexy, there’s more to it than the plain ol’ period and the common comma. There’s the accent mark (é) the tilde (ñ), and the umlaut (Å).

But there’s also the interrobang, an exclamation point superimposed on a question mark, and the expostrophe, an exclamation point with an asterisk at the bottom — both made up by folks who just wanted to add a little oomph to their sentences.

Neither took off — ever. Probably a good thing, because isn’t punctuation confusing enough?!

Children thirst for knowledge and can easily grasp the concept of the ellipsis and the semi colon, Rubin says, something he’s seen firsthand since he gave up the pen to don a cape and visit elementary schools all over northern California, where he spreads his prowess for punctuation.

But somewhere between grade school and high school, Rubin says, they forget the 101 uses for the comma and become punctually illiterate — so much so that by the time they get to college nearly a third of them must take remedial English.

“They get it,” he said. “Then they lose it.”

And of all the things high school students must learn, apparently punctuation isn’t high on the list. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, high school teachers named punctuation at the end of sentences the 31st most important thing that students need to learn in English class.

Pam Simon, a media specialist at Auburn and at McAlear-Sawden elementary schools, said that when you can do something interactive with children, like Monday’s session, it helps them remember the lesson.

“It gives them a little hook,” Simon said. “Anytime you can engage them, get them involved, it sticks better.”

Simon said the punctuation marks most commonly used by elementary students are the period and the comma, the exclamation point and the question mark. But their favorite has to be the quotation marks and children will invent lots of dialogue in their stories in order to use them as often as possible.

Rubin’s favorite is the exclamation point because it is used to convey a feeling.