

Happy "/;!(?'?" Day

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Good Sunday morning to you. We're off to IHOP for breakfast this morning. Jeff Rubin is out to save the world, one apostrophe at a time.

Monday is National Punctuation Day, a holiday the former newspaperman from Pinole (it's about 20 miles northeast of San Francisco) established in 2004 in an attempt to slow the decline of western civilization.

The day is (quotation mark) a celebration of the lowly comma (comma) correctly used quotes and other proper uses of periods (comma) semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipsis (comma) (quotation mark) according to Rubin (apostrophe)s Web site (dash) www (dot) nationalpunctuationday (dot) com (period)

Rubin founded NPD as a way to draw attention to the importance of proper punctuation.

The holiday, he said, was born out of his frustration over not only punctuation, but poor spelling, grammar and other errors found in newspapers, magazines, advertising billboards and books.

"I was sick of what I was seeing," he said. "I would redline (the errors) and send it off to the editors. I was so upset my wife told me I needed to channel my anger."

Rubin decided to focus his efforts on periods and semicolons.

"I picked on punctuation because I'm good at it," he said. "And not many people are."

Punctuation problems, he said, begin in school because teachers often have little time to spend teaching the do's and don'ts.

Rubin and his wife, Norma, created Punctuation Playtime, a 45-minute program for elementary school students, featuring games, activities and songs that reinforce punctuation lessons.

During the program, Jeff dons a blue super-hero costume with a bright red cape and a white exclamation point on his chest and becomes "Punctuation Man."

The couple has brought the program to dozens of California schools.

"Teachers love it," he said. "Kids love it."

However semicolons, hyphens, exclamation points and commas are also often found adrift in the corporate world.

"People tell me the cover letters they get on job applications are so bad they end up right in the trash," Rubin said. "People with poor writing skills do get hired for entry-level jobs, but they don't advance. Many of the more advanced jobs require solid writing skills."

I asked Rubin if in the world of text messaging and e-mail — the 25th anniversary of the emoticon :-), first used by Carnegie Mellon University professor Scott E. Fahlman, was celebrated just last week — punctuation was passe.

I thought Punctuation Man might don his tights and cape and fly right out of my phone.

“As long as we have the written word, there will be punctuation,” he declared.

“Punctuation will always exist. It gives life to the written word.”

So there you have it.

Tomorrow, join with semicolons, colons, brackets, parentheses and exclamation points throughout the land in celebration of National Punctuation Day.

“Would it be so bad if on Monday every teacher took 15 minutes in class and spent it teaching punctuation?” Rubin asked.