



Punctuate. Celebrate!

Writing symbols in spotlight Monday

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Second-tier holidays are mostly out of control. Do you really need Take Your Daughter to Work Day to be official? Couldn't you just slip the kid in the front door when you have a light schedule? Then there are Administrative Professionals Day and Grandparents' Day, neither of which I remember, much less observe.

But now I've heard about National Punctuation Day, and this is one I support without reservation. Period. I end my statement without the overused exclamation point, and I wisely forgo the question mark, semicolon and comma.

Monday will mark the fourth observance of National Punctuation Day.

According to Web site <http://nationalpunctuationday.com>, the day reminds librarians, educators and parents to emphasize writing skills among their students and offspring. And the site tells business people they can be judged on how they express themselves. (There's no need for quotation marks here because the information has been paraphrased from the site. If I had quoted word for word, double quotation marks would have been required.)

Former newspaperman Jeff Rubin founded the special day; its theme is "a semicolon is NOT a surgical procedure." The previous sentence's semicolon correctly separates two complete clauses instead of using and.

Semicolons also divide series when some or all elements of its list contain commas. For example: She was selling sweet apple varieties, including Red Delicious and Gala; tart apples, including Granny Smith and Winesap; and red plums.

I bet that Rubin, writer that he is, would whip all of those commas and semicolons into their proper places. And he would surely set off the apposition — "writer that he is" — with a comma before writer and after is, whereas many people goof by omitting the second comma.

Rubin makes public appearances plugging his cause. "Successful people have good communication skills, and that includes knowing how to write properly," he says on his Web site. "Punctuation counts. A misplaced comma can alter the meaning of a message."

I wholeheartedly agree, as would author Lynne Truss. A few years back, her top-selling book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, gave examples of punctuation and grammar no-nos. The title alludes to pandas that — without the comma — would dine correctly on bamboo shoots and foliage rather than tote a gun as they do in the cover illustration.

So how can you do your bit for National Punctuation Day?

I suggest you help someone use the apostrophe correctly.

First off, use a genuine apostrophe instead of the single open-quote mark employed by the recent film *Shoot 'Em Up*. It's backward.

And that last sentence brings me to a pet peeve: misuse of its and it's.

Even professional writers mess this up, and I don't see why it's so difficult.

When the apostrophe is present, you have a contraction replacing the words it is or it has: It's a lovely day. It's been a busy afternoon.

Its is a possessive pronoun: The dog hurt its paw.

Ten-pound books (note the hyphen needed with the compound adjective) probably have been written about possessives, another source of apostrophe abuse.

The problem is that English is so fiendishly irregular for possessives: girl's toys (one girl has multiple toys) and girls' toys (at least two girls have at least two toys). But then when you get into a child's toys (one child with multiple toys) and then children's toys (multiple kids, multiple toys), the apostrophe correctly comes before the s because of the irregular plural.

Apostrophes also pop up for no reason.

Who hasn't seen signs or advertisements such as Haircut's \$7? The noun should be a simple plural, no apostrophe with that s.

I cringe over the use of The Smith's on items such as personalized doormats or mailboxes. No apostrophe is needed. Had "The Smith's" been followed by home or mailbox, the sign would correctly read: The Smiths' Home or The Smiths' Mailbox, with the apostrophe after the s for plural possessive of a family surname.

Just as irritating to finicky grammarians is the dangling "a friend of Joan's." A friend of Joan's WHAT? "A friend of Joan" is correct usage, so save the ink from that apostrophe and s.

I hope you'll do your bit to support National Punctuation Day. I plan to e-mail my three daughters this article. I pledge to use no emoticons :-(in my introductory message. I'll even skip the exclamation points after I tell them to read this!!!!