

Comma sense marks fall

By Kathleen Costello

There's one more reason to look forward to September.

As if the crisp air and spectacular foliage weren't enough, this month also heralds the onset of football season and the most thrilling part of the major league baseball season (at least for Yankee fans).

But I recently discovered one more autumnal occasion to mark on my calendar every Sept. 24.

Today is National Punctuation Day.

Being a word person, I love punctuation — when it's used correctly. And being a grammar geek, I know how to use it correctly. Sure, sometimes I wish I was gifted in a discipline such as quantum physics or marine biology: something that could render me independently wealthy or take me scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef.

But instead, I know that commas should be used between coordinate adjectives but not between cumulative adjectives.

When I learned that someone had created a holiday devoted to my beloved little marks, I instantly was intrigued: not only because someone else out there was equally nerdy, but also because punctuation is so important — and so frequently misused.

Take the apostrophe. It's a simple mark that denotes possession. For example, "balls" is plural, meaning more than one, while "ball's" must be followed by whatever the ball has ("a ball's velocity"). That's all there is to it, but the tiny mark is routinely bungled. Even advertising campaigns, with their million-dollar budgets, misuse the apostrophe. Wendy's got it right, but Popeyes got it wrong. Domino's, right; Little Caesars, wrong.

Commas may be the most misused punctuation mark of all, probably because there are dozens of comma rules: some well-known and some obscure. A comma, though small, is powerful; it possesses the ability to alter the meaning of a sentence:

My friends, Red Sox fans, eat worms.

My friends: "Red Sox fans eat worms!"

That brings me to my most hated punctuation mark: the exclamation point! (I despise dangling participles too, but that's a grammar issue, and thus, another column.)

Exclamation points work well when used sparingly. However, they are commonly overused. To me, an abundance of exclamation points is the equivalent of writing a sentence completely in capital letters: IT MAKES ME FEEL AS IF I NEED TO YELL OUT THE WORDS!

Perhaps the most mysterious punctuation mark is the ellipsis. Whether it's being used to stand in for a few words or to show that more words will follow, readers can never be sure of exactly what's missing:

There's a stench . . . in Fenway Park.

There's a stench in Fenway Park . . .

In both cases, the meaning is elusive. What was my intention? Only the ellipsis knows.

I certainly wouldn't elevate National Punctuation Day to the importance of an occasion such as International Peace Day. Nonetheless, if a national holiday can teach just a couple of people the difference between a dash and a hyphen or when to use a colon versus a semicolon, that's certainly something that deserves celebration.

Period.