

They're 'passionate' about punctuation

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Today is National Punctuation Day, the day set aside to lament bad punctuation and celebrate the good. As usual, there will be the traditional parades, rallies, walk-a-thons, TV specials, speeches by the presidential candidates and fireworks at dusk.

But amid all that hoopla, take a quiet moment to salute those unsung heroes who are always on the "lookout" for "misplaced" quotation marks. You can find them chuckling over them on the Internet at The "Blog" of "Unnecessary" Quotation Marks or cavorting in the Facebook group Quotation Mark "Hunters."

"People don't think that punctuation means things, so they just throw it in there," says Bethany Keeley, a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia who runs the blog.

"Most of the time people are using the quotes to draw attention to something," she adds. And the abusers seem unaware that putting words in quotes usually signifies irony or some sort of wink.

On the blog, people submit "photos" of signs in which the quote marks make no sense and are, in fact, sometimes mocking the very words they hoped to "emphasize."

Thus the high school banner exhorting the basketball team to do its "best," or the sign welcoming visitors to "Historic" Fort Meade. A woman in the Facebook group said her mother made her a wedding album and captioned a photo "Here comes 'the Bride'."

Unnecessary quote marks are different from air quotes. The unnecessary ones are usually on signs made by people who don't understand what quotation marks do. Air quotes, the little wiggling fingers, indicate "sarcasm" or "irony."

"My new problem is people intentionally use air quotes around me because I'm the quotation marks girl," says Keeley. "That's kind of annoying."

Keeley, 25, started the blog in 2005 while at UGA. “I shared an office with a friend and one day thought it would be funny to have a very specific blog that tracks something about the language,” she says “I’ve always been fond of unnecessary quotation marks and joked about them with family, so I picked that.”

The blog started slowly, but a link on the Web site College Humor boosted traffic tremendously, and she now makes “a decent side income” from ad revenue. She can keep that going after she gets her Ph.D. in rhetoric.

So on National Punctuation Day, while others ponder the slackening of “standards” of the serial comma or the maddening misuse of the apostrophe in “its,” the “crusade” against unnecessary quotation marks goes on.