

THE SUN



Veteran drudge John E. McIntyre writes about language, usage, journalism & arbitrarily chosen subjects.

Punctuated equilibrium

With National Punctuation Day creeping up on us, I wanted you to be prepared. So I am supplying you with a set of resolutions to have ready by September 24.

RESOLUTIONS FOR NATIONAL PUNCTUATION DAY, SEPTEMBER 24, AND THEREAFTER

Resolved: That I will use a comma to separate independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

I know what is the right thing to do // , // and I will do it gladly.

Resolved: That I will use a semicolon* to join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction.

I saw what you did // ; // I know who you are.

Resolved: That I will refrain from inserting a superfluous comma between compound verbs.

The careful writer understands what the rules are // and // knows when to safely veer from them.

Resolved: That I will refrain from inserting a superfluous comma between two relative clauses.

The careful editor understands that many writers punctuate from intuition rather than training // and // that correction is often required.

Resolved: That I will always use a period with an ellipsis at the end of a sentence.

“But Aldus gets the credit generally // // ”

Resolved: That I will not use the apostrophe to make anything other than a number or a letter a plural.

The // Smiths // learned their // p's and q's // in elementary school.

Resolved: That I will refrain from using dashes for merely parenthetical material, using parentheses or commas instead, reserving the dash to indicate a break in continuity.

Journalists // , // who have often been recipients of bad advice on language // , // can receive assistance from an unlikely source // — // the copy desk.

Resolved: That I will learn the difference between a dash and a hyphen and punctuate accordingly.

This, dear ones, is a hyphen: // - //. This is a dash: // — //.

Resolved: That I will use square brackets, not parentheses, to set off interpolated matter, no matter what the Associated Press does.

“But Aldus // [Manutius] // gets the credit generally. ...”

Resolved: That I will use no more than one dozen exclamation points in the course of my professional career, and never to use more than one at a time.

* Thank you, Aldus Manutius.

— John McIntyre, mild-mannered copy editor for a great metropolitan newspaper, has fussed over writers' work at The Baltimore Sun since 1986. He is the director of its copy desk, an affiliate faculty member at Loyola College of Maryland, a former president of the American Copy Editors Society, a native of Kentucky, a graduate of Michigan State and Syracuse, and a moderate prescriptivist. If you are inspired by a spirit of contradiction, comment on his posts or write to him at john.mcintyre@baltsun.com.