

A semicolon is not a body part

By Jim Shelton
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The nation's punctuation is running amok. Hyphens come and go as they please. Colons have a stranglehold on the nation's movie theaters. Dashes pass themselves off as snappy writing. Quotation marks roam innocent sentences with impunity.

And apostrophes? They went rogue years ago.

"There are permutations of the language galore that make me wince," says Evelyn Martinez, a retired psychiatric social worker from New Haven. "Often, there appears to be an acceptance which seems nuts, too, but results in an alternative and accepted common usage."

For example, it peeves her when she sees a reference to the 1970's, rather than the 1970s. Likewise, she's bugged by periods or commas that follow quotation marks, rather than precede them.

She also decries the increased use of dashes to denote any and all pauses in a sentence. "I tend to think that in some ways, what influences the use of a wide variety of stylistic uses of punctuation is the considerable amount of communicating we do online," Martinez notes. She says e-mails and text messages limit expression "due to the lack of voice modulations, normal pauses, sarcasm, affective responses or expressions of emphasis."

Indeed, you're more apt to find a semicolon in an e-mail emoticon than in a serious piece of writing these days.

Need proof? Last month, a semicolon appeared on a New York City subway poster and the New York Times wrote a story about it.

On the Internet, there's a blog devoted to unnecessary quotation marks: <http://www.quotation-marks.blogspot.com/> It cites such examples as a business with a sign in front that says: DRIVER "WANTED" and another sign warning that SMOKING IS ALLOWED "IN" PARKING LOTS.

As for the common comma, in 2006 a misplaced comma led to the potential cancellation of a multimillion dollar communications contract in Canada. In San Francisco, a court

case involving gay marriage was tossed out because the legal brief was so poorly punctuated.

“It’s extremely sad,” says Jeff Rubin, a California-based newsletter publisher who gives school presentations dressed as a superhero called Punctuation Man. He’s pushed for a national holiday devoted to punctuation since 2004.

“It used to be you’d never find errors in books, and now I find them all the time,” Rubin says. “I see CEOs and corporate executives who can’t write, spell or punctuate.”

Rubin says apostrophes in plural possessives are a minefield of errors. He also sees indiscriminate use of commas and semicolons. Lately, he’s taken to marking up his morning newspaper with a red editing pen.

“Punctuation is about precision,” says Christian “Bing” Miller, head of the English department at Branford High School. “A big one for me is the run-on sentence with a comma replacing the period. Something like: ‘There’s a game this weekend, come out and support the team.’”

Bonnie Pachesa, principal at New Haven’s Edgewood Magnet School, says punctuation problems are evident in advertising, newspapers, Web sites and on television. “It’s all over the place,” she says. “I think, for a while there, people weren’t putting as much energy into teaching punctuation. We’re doing it now, though.”

Two of her school’s language arts teachers, Deirdre Prisco and Tricia Harkins, are on the front lines of this campaign every day.

“We’ve been doing a lot of work on it, especially with all the computer shorthand filtering into students’ writing,” Prisco explains.

According to Harkins, one of the biggest challenges for teachers is imparting punctuation skills while also teaching that e-mail abbreviations such as “RU” for “are you” are not appropriate in good writing.

What does this say about the future of the hyphen, the comma and the apostrophe? “Oh, apostrophes are running rampant,” Prisco says.