



Oakland, California

A day for nitpickers

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The room was full of professional speakers, both beginning and accomplished. The presenter, a well-known marketing expert, was talking about achieving credibility as a speaker. A bullet on his PowerPoint slide, which I was following on the handout, said “Always site your sources.”

As I always do, I corrected the handout, crossing out “site” and writing “cite.” I turned to my friend and pointed it out. She acknowledged it with a nod.

“It affects his credibility,” I whispered.

“Are you going to say anything?” she asked, knowing my penchant for correcting people in public. She edged ever so slightly away from me, in case she needed to deny knowing me if, and when, I said something embarrassing.

A debate started in my head. Should I mention it? The guy had written something like 27 books. He was an expert. Then, again, it would save him from embarrassment in front of audiences that were not as friendly as this one.

Then I heard whispering behind me. “He used the wrong ‘cite,’ “ someone said.

I raised my hand. By this time, I had missed every other point on the slide because I was obsessing over the boo-boo in bullet No. 2. In fact, the speaker had moved on to the next slide.

He called on me, and to my horror, handed me a wireless microphone. My scolding was going to be amplified.

I tried to soften it. “I have to tell you that I read my mother’s letters with a red pen in my hand,” I said.

“Oh-h-h, that’s cold!” he said.

“So,” I continued, “please understand if I point out that your last slide used the wrong ‘cite.’ It should be the c-i-t-e, not s-i-t-e. I only point it out because you were talking about credibility.”

He went back to the last slide, thought for a moment and gave the perfect comeback.

“Congratulations! You have found the first of three typos purposely placed in this presentation to see if you were paying attention. Whoever finds all three wins a new Mercedes!”

The audience laughed, I relaxed and the Mercedes-lover behind me promptly found another typo: a “you” instead of “your” on the next slide.

I've tried to fight it, but I just can't help myself. Typos, grammar errors, and improper punctuation grate on me like pitchy “American Idol” auditions bug Randy Jackson.

Fellow nitpickers, it's time to celebrate. Today, Wednesday, Sept. 24, is National Punctuation Day. According to founder Jeff Rubin, the special day is “a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotes, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons, and the ever-mysterious ellipsis.”

One of the most egregious mistakes (and yes, I use the word “egregious” in everyday conversation) is the misuse of the apostrophe when forming plurals of nouns. Celebrants of National Punctuation Day (NPD) have sent in photos of bad signage to the NPD web site for their like-minded grammarians to chuckle over. Here's an example. A park sign reads: “DOG’S ALLOWED ON LEASH’S WITH SCOOPER’S.”

There are standards, people, and somebody has to uphold them.

Still, I fear I sometimes go too far. I'm developing a reputation. In fact, one of my readers sent a lovely note with pictures of her extended dog family. On the flap of the envelope, she wrote, “Please go easy on my spelling and grammer. I've had a rough day so far!”

I didn't even uncap my red pen on that one.