



## Punctuation marks and parking tickets

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Two landmark events — well, to the bookish among us, at least in America — quietly slipped by these past couple of weeks. One was Banned Books Week (Sept. 27 to Oct. 4), about which I'll have more to say in a future column.

The other was National Punctuation Day, marked last Sept. 24, which is in its fifth year. Its press release went like this (open and closed quotation marks supplied by me):

“PINOLE, CA — Why is punctuation important Jeff Rubin the Punctuation Man and founder of National Punctuation Day explains that without punctuation you would not be able to express your feelings in writing not to mention know when to pause or stop or ask a question or yell at someone and without punctuation you would not be able to separate independent clauses and show an example of how a business lost millions because of an errant comma so dont forget the most important punctuation mark \$\$\$\$\$\$ OK so a dollar signs isnt a punctuation mark but its important dont you agree”

That reads like a paragraph some students of mine could've written (most of my students fortunately still know better), but let's face it — in these days of SMS and e-mail, punctuation's often the first to go, even before proper spelling, and few are mourning the passing of commas and semicolons because they never really understood what they were there for, in the first place.

As a professional writer and editor as well as a teacher of English, I derive inordinate satisfaction — perhaps insanely so — from sticking commas, apostrophes, and colons where they should be, but even I have given in to the occasional act of linguistic laziness, most tangibly in the comma that no longer follows most greetings these days. For example, “Hi, Henry” is now — in 99 percent of e-mailed messages — rendered as “Hi Henry.” The expressiveness that attends the pause after a comma (as in “Oh, Henry!”) has fled its more hurried and more prosaic rendition (“Oh Henry”).

I can just imagine my perplexed sophomore scratching his head over why any of this should matter in the grand scheme of things. (I have two or three particular readers who periodically send me love notes along the lines of “Who cares what you think?” and “You talk too much!” I’ll expect to hear from them shortly.) My old-fashioned answer is that punctuation, like grammar, is a hallmark of the well-ordered mind, but in these days when such observations can only provoke rants like “You talk too much!”, who cares, indeed, about well-ordered minds?

In any case, should you want to delve deeper into the mysteries of punctuation, then I suggest that you check out <http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com>. Better yet, grab a copy of that unlikely bestseller by Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Profile Books, 2003), a journey through the history and uses of punctuation marks. For another view that occasionally disses Truss, Strunk & White, and other icons and mavens of language and grammar (what it otherwise calls “prescriptivist poppycock”), have a look at the Language Log (<http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>). Happy hyphenation!

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No one should be happy to receive a parking ticket, but my first one actually came to me last week as a pleasant surprise. A parking ticket — in Quezon City! In the Philippines! Who would have ever thought we would see one?

I drove up to my bank on Katipunan Avenue, and parked my car on the wide sidewalk — like I always do — without minding the pink line that had been freshly painted along one side of it, and which was obviously supposed to mean something, which I even more obviously missed. It took me nearly an hour to get my business done at the bank — no, we weren’t counting my money — at the end of which I got back to the car, only to find what looked like a flyer clamped under the wiper.

“Dang,” I thought, “another ad for a condo I can’t afford.” I reached around the windshield and was about to toss it into the trash when I saw that it had some handwriting and my plate number on it. So I looked more closely and realized that it was that rarest of ephemera — a parking ticket, issued to me for “blocking the roadway” or some such infraction.

My first instinct was to scream “Like hell I’m blocking anything!”, because I very surely was not. The sidewalk was clear to the front and back of me — which, in hindsight,

was probably because everyone else knew something I didn't. In other words, what used to be a communal parking area was now a no-parking zone, and I had deposited my Vitara smack in the middle of it. I suppose I was lucky, because the form had a checked box that said, "Vehicle not towed." No traffic aide or policeman was in sight to argue with. Whoever had left the ticket had better things to do and had moved on, presumably to other errantly parked vehicles down the street.

My indignation soon turned to wonderment as it dawned on me that I was staring at a sign of progress. Somewhere in the system, someone had actually said "Okay, let's do what we should have started doing 50 years ago," and sent out uniformed flunkies with pads of tickets to hand out, with further instructions not to hang around and wait for the hapless motorist while munching on a toothpick. The ticket instructed me to go to the nearest branch of a bank and pay P200 to the government's account within so many days. In that way, the government got its ounce of flesh, the ticket-giver got his commission, and I got my lesson in good traffic citizenship, all without too much fuss and at a price I could afford.

I promptly paid the fine, eager to help in making justice work and vowing never to cross a pink line on the concrete again. Of course, the next day, I got up to headlines telling me that a man who'd murdered two young people on the streets of Manila was back on those streets, having been set free by executive fiat, ostensibly for "good behavior." The awakened citizen in me sighed, no longer knowing what to think, or how to behave.