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From commas to quote marks, a day to honor punctuation

By Lisa Black

CHICAGO, Sept. 21, 2009 — Fear not the semicolon; Thursday is National Punctuation Day! It is time to celebrate the commonplace comma, the over-excitable exclamation point and, yes, even the lowly period.

Jeff Rubin, 59, a former copy editor determined to rid the world of dangling participles, successfully bid for Sept. 24 to be listed as a holiday in Chase's Calendar of Events in 2004. Since then, he and his wife have cooked a meatloaf shaped like a question mark, performed in classrooms and dedicated a Web site to good grammar (NationalPunctuationDay.com).

This year Rubin asks that anyone who shares his passion enter a baking contest by producing a pastry shaped as a punctuation mark. The deadline is Sept. 30.

He spends morning hours hunched over a newspaper with a red Sharpie, underlining improperly used "it's" and "its," among other common errors. The Pinole, Calif., resident mails the corrections to the offending writer and scribbles angry notes in column margins.

"Once I entered journalism as a trade, my anal self took over," said Rubin, who now owns a newsletter business.

One year, Rubin said, he created a firestorm when he endorsed the serial use of a comma within a string of three or more words. The practice taught by many English teachers contradicts newspaper style.

"Oh my God, I received letters from irate journalists and copywriters and parents calling me a traitor," he said.