



Enid, Oklahoma

The misunderstood drama of the comma!

By Diane Peck, Columnist

Today, I kid you not, is National Punctuation Day. I can hardly contain myself, since I didn't know there were enough people left in America who actually still give a rat's behind about punctuation to make it the subject of a day of celebration. I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I've spent worrying over the slow and agonizing demise of that small collection of symbols I have come to cherish.

It is a relatively new observance, National Punctuation Day, but it is one that thrills me to an exclamation point since I am something of a Dalai Lama of the comma. Case in point: I once worked for a woman who told me I use too many commas.

"What do you mean?" I asked rather indignantly.

"Well," she said as she began to tap out an annoying little rhythm on the rough draft of the newsletter I was working on, "you don't need one here, here, here or there. And frankly, there's no need for one in that last sentence either." She looked at me, all pleased with her herself, like she'd written the book on the cure for the common comma, or something.

Of course I use a lot of commas. I need those tiny, but powerful punctuation marks. I was quite taken aback, but not quite speechless.

"Besides using them in their proper place, I often use them to create drama — like when I want the reader to pause for a moment," I managed to get out, hoping she wouldn't notice I was enunciating carefully through clenched teeth. She might as well have said I had too many teeth and feet. That is how deep my love of the comma goes.

Good punctuation in writing is like the difference between a plain and fully loaded baked potato. Creative punctuation can give a lumpy cluster of words some zing and zest! And though all punctuation is useful and important, I definitely have three or four favorite forms.

Just after my undying affection for the comma, comes my fondness for the dash — most

effective when adding just a touch of detail to a comment. And the ellipsis? I notice I tend to use those three little dots more for the longer dramatic pause than a comma allows, rather than just a way to allow a reader to finish a sentence in his or her own ...

Parentheses are another means of throwing in some additional information (hopefully, not too much information!) to add some punch to a comment. Question marks are good because life is full of them, isn't it? I guess the period is OK, since you can't end every sentence with a more exciting piece of punctuation. And there is definitely a time and place for the colon: preceding a list of things, introducing a quotation and following the salutation of a business letter. The semi-colon, however, gets on my nerves; I don't care for it much!

Quotation marks are the bread and butter of good conversation and a tidy way to quote exclamation-point-hater F. Scott Fitzgerald, who once said, "an exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke." Then there's the quotation mark's often misused but completely necessary half-brother, the apostrophe. The art of leavin' out letters and showin' ownership isn't happenin' without the apostrophe's handy help!

There are, of course, a few other forms of punctuation. Though half the size of a dash, the hyphen serves the higher purpose of dividing and joining words and the writing out of numbers. Near as I can tell, a solidus is just a fancy word for slash, which, as you know, can be forward or backward these days. I try to avoid 'em either way. And brackets? I have no earthly idea when to use those things, nor do I have any inclination to start finding out at this late date.

But even without slashes and brackets, there is still plenty of punctuation left to use the heck out of. So, on this great day of celebratory days, let's lay some words down and punctuate. Yeah, let's punctuate like it's going out of style!