long island business news

Long Island, New York

By John Kominicki
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I was traveling last week and missed the deadline for the first annual National Punctuation Day Baking Contest, in which contestants were to bake something in the shape of a punctuation mark and send it to National Punctuation Day headquarters in Pinole, Calif. Entries were limited to cookies, cakes, pastries, doughnuts and breads, but the NPD Web site has also been featuring a recipe for Punctuation Meatloaf, which does not look especially appetizing, in part because the ingredients include "1 box Stove Top Stuffing, any flavor."

Well, that and the fact that while you can shape raw meat to resemble a question mark, it will still look like it has something to do with the colon.

If you get my drift.

National Punctuation Day was created by Jeff Rubin, a former journalist, and his wife Norma, who bakes the meatloaves. Although they also have real jobs, Mr. and Mrs. Rubin appear to spend an inordinate amount of time promoting the correct usage of our dozen or so punctuation marks, through appearances at malls and supermarkets and via Punctuation Playtime, a classroom program in which they exclaim their point dressed up as caped crusaders.

By the way, National Punctuation Day now appears in *Chase's Calendar of Events*, the authoritative guide to America's special celebrations, which include Sweet Potato Day, the first Monday in April, and Go Hog Wild Eat Country Ham Month, which is October.

But enough sport. Punctuation, I think we all know, is important. It allows us to guide readers through our written words, enticing them to linger for a moment, or come to a full stop. By using proper punctuation, we can convey excitement! We can introduce a sense of … anticipation. And what better way to add an aside – like this one – while asking a question?

Nimble punctuators can even make use of the semicolon; I know I like to. (And I haven't even mentioned parentheses.)

Punctuation was invented by the Greeks, but only barely. They used three dots to regulate the meter of plays and poems, one on the bottom of a line of print, one centered and one above. Aldus Manutius, a Venetian printer who worked in the late 1400s, is credited with adding the semicolon — so he's the culprit! — as well as italic type and the comma.

In those days, punctuation mainly steered those reading a text aloud, which was common in the days before amazon.com. Additional punctuation marks were added in the years following the invention of the printing press and large-scale distribution of Bibles,

although the rules were different. In the 1500s, for example, readers assigned a one-beat pause to a comma, two beats to a semicolon and three to a colon.

It's why you can't read anything by John Donne without the Cliff's Notes.

The punctuation we use today can be traced directly to Ben Jonson's "English Grammar," published in 1640. Punctuation rules were not significantly updated again until 1906, when Henry and Francis Fowler published their landmark tome, "The King's English."

(That was a great joke of the time: "Who's fowler, Henry or Francis?" But I digress.)

Modern American punctuation reached its apex in America in the 1950s and '60s, when such religious orders as the Little Sisters of the Inquisition used metal rulers to impress upon students the importance of proper grammar.

I still duck and cower involuntarily whenever I see a misplaced apostrophe. It's the other reason I don't use Christian Science reading rooms.

The sisters' concerted efforts are being erased, sadly, by phone texting and the digital shorthand used on social media sites. According to a recent survey, there are now just 117 Americans who can properly use the ellipsis.

Even as a meatloaf.

To be fair, the telegraph once prompted its own form of maddening abbreviation. Back in 1862, French novelist Victor Hugo famously wired his publishers, Hurst & Blacket, to see what they thought of his manuscript, a work entitled, "Les Miserables."

"?" Hugo wrote.

"!" was the reply.

Proper punctuation does remain important in business, where Catholic-schooled CEOs routinely discard resumés that misuse the bracket. In 2006, punctuation took center stage in a $2 million lawsuit in which a Canadian telecommunications company lost a contract because of an errant comma in the following passage: "Subject to the termination provisions of this Agreement, this Agreement shall be effective from the date it is made and shall continue in force for a period of five (5) years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five (5) year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party."

You caught it, right? The court ruled that the comma after the word "made" turned the words "and thereafter for successive five (5) year terms" into a parenthetical phrase, allowing the other party to cancel the agreement on one year's notice, even though the initial five-year term had not expired. So, there are many ways poor punctuation can hurt you.

Just ask Sister Mary Benedicta.