



We May Also Need a National Punctuation Day

By Benjamin Tawiah, October 2, 2009

Canada celebrated her fifth National Punctuation Day last Thursday. The day saw newspapers and scholarly magazines devoting precious news space to articles on grammar and many of the things E.B. White so eloquently discusses in *The Elements of Style*. White's treatment of the rules of writing has mostly been judged dictatorial and very uncompromising. Perhaps, that is because he wrote those rules in 1959, a pre-Facebook age where scholarship was valued, because staccato text messages on a mobile phone had not been imagined. Like William Strunk, Jr., the original author of *The Elements of Style*, White was mostly impatient with people who misuse the semicolon and other punctuation marks. And like Pierre Ankomah, my English master in secondary school, he would take time to explain how and where the dreaded tool should be used. You can almost hear him yelling at a decibel: "Do not join independent clauses by a comma. If two or more clauses, grammatically complete and not joined by a conjunction, are to form a single compound sentence, the proper mark of punctuation is a semicolon." But unlike White, Mr Pierre, as we affectionately called him, was quite easy on students who were not very 'mechanical' with mechanical accuracy, but he almost went ballistic when they confused a letter to the press with an article. He would painstakingly describe the instances where the two should be used and the formats they followed. Usually, he came back to explain them for the umpteenth time, because they were common mistakes that were often commonly repeated, much like the punctuations in today's writing.

If White were alive today, he would wonder why a generation that is so fortunate to have the writing rules captured in techno-friendly formats for immediacy and convenience, is sacrificing the rules with such impunity. Many college and university professors have given up on telling their students their "its" from their "it's." You would find that many students, and indeed, working adults have not read George Bernard Shaw, but they are happy to lazily do away with what Shaw calls the "uncouth basilli" of the English language: apostrophes. Now, folks do not care very much how they write what they mean to write. Even big organisations with good sales and marketing departments do not care about the information they put out for public consumption. That is the problem with Tim Horton's, a Canadian fast-food chain. When hockey hero Tim Horton founded the chain in 1964 in Hamilton, Ontario, he proudly named it after himself: Tim Horton's. That was to say that it was Tim Horton's property, the apostrophe dutifully communicating the message. Today, a corruption of grammar and our sheer inability to obey the simple rules on how the possessives are formed in English, have banished the apostrophe, presupposing that there were several Tim Hortons. But there was only one.

So, Tim Hortons it would be. Who cares? Well, we should all care when the rules are

not obeyed because they create problems. Apostrophes are ugly, as Michael Bolen of the National Post claims. He writes that “Finding sentences that would become unclear if their apostrophes were torn from them is next to impossible, while the confusion and frustration their usage creates is widespread.” Yet, apostrophes and other small harmless punctuation marks are very necessary. A blatant disregard of the rules could be expensive. That happens to be the experience of Rogers Communications Inc., a Canadian telecommunications company whose misplacement of a comma in a contract earned her \$2.13million debt and a cancellation of a lucrative contract.

The story of the \$2million comma was a very interesting one. It was the construction of just one sentence in a 14 page contract that led to the disagreement. The controversial sentence read: The agreement “shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing either party.” The second comma is what caused the trouble. The placement, or rather the misplacement of that second comma allows for the contract to be cancelled at any time upon one year’s written notice. If the comma had not been placed where it was, it would have meant that the right to cancel wouldn’t apply to the first five years. Rogers’ intention was to hold onto the contract for at least five years, but all that was undone by a single comma. Nothing could change the ruling.

You may not be worth \$2 million, but it is still important to mind the punctuations when writing even the most casual of messages to your friend next door. I picked these sentences from a popular Ghanaian news website: (1) Atta-Mills has confidence in his ministers, what about the bribe takers and the apprentices, who are learning on the job-something needs to be done, quickly. (2) Now Rawlings would be bowing his head in shame. He called Kufour names. He called Akuffo-Addo names. Whatever goes up will surely come down; whoever thought? Consider this third example from a Facebook chat: I dunno who’s tellin the truth. Ok we wil c u guys @ the hse to sort tins out ttly.

A strict E.B White punctuation rule has been broken in the first example. A semicolon should be used to divide the two independent clauses. The dash and the second comma have not been appropriately used. In the second example, we may do with a comma after ‘Now.’ Unless the effect is to create dramatic suspense, we would rather collapse the second and third sentences into one, as in: He called Kufour and Akuffo Addo names. Is “Whoever thought?” a clause that could stand on its own? If not, then the semicolon is not properly used. The third example is typical of Facebook and Twitter users. This is the shortcut construction that is cutting short our knowledge of the rules of writing. Interlocutors are able to make meaning out of these amputated forms. Kenyon Wallace was unmistakable when he wrote that: “Elegant writing is the mark of an elegant mind, but don’t expect it on Twitter or Facebook.”

Yet, elegant writing is important if you want to be taken seriously. Years ago, a gentleman wrote a very sincere mail to me, profusely confessing his difficulty with spoken English. He was worried that his bad English was getting in the way of his career development. He had seen his juniors get promoted to manage big projects because of their good communication skills. He added a postscript which read: “Please don’t judge my English because I don’t write very well. I struggle with even very basic sentence constructions and I am generally not impressive. You would be amazed to know how I struggled to write this email to you. I want what I say or write to impress people. That is my problem, I am not impressive. Do you have any advice on books I could read? ”

Usually, I would write an even more pitiful response to such a letter, but I decided not to indulge in self-deprecation this time. I sent the man a few tips I learnt in journalism school, stressing that he shouldn't write with the intention to please or impress. Professor Kwame Kakari would write on my scripts: "Tawiah, say what you have to say; do not try to impress anybody." That is probably the best advice any good teacher would give you. Short and simple sentences make things easy for the writer and the reader. You are spared the hellish experience of deciding between a semicolon and a dash when you write short sentences. When do you use the ellipsis instead of a full stop? (The Chicago Manual of Style describes it as three spaced periods). What about the exclamation sign? F. Scott Fitzgerald, a good grammarian, says the exclamation mark should be used once a year. I haven't used it in 15 years; it is like laughing at your own jokes. Even accomplished writers confess their difficulty in using these punctuation marks. An editor I have recently become acquainted with says he is scared he would use the semicolon wrongly, so he tries to avoid it altogether. He is equally careful not to sprinkle meaningless commas on a page to create unnecessary run-on sentences. He seems to have infected me with that fear.

Well, there are times you cannot avoid writing run-on sentences. So, the comma would necessarily be used; it only has to be used wisely. Like all other punctuation marks, they break sentences down for easy comprehension without having to start new sentences. Mastering their usage would always make writing a delightful experience. Victor Borge, an educationist and a comedian had a very lively way of teaching the punctuation marks. He created different sounds for each of them, often squawking, hooting and squealing to demonstrate their different uses. Today, there are many newspaper columns and blogs on language use. Yet, even well educated users continue to write her's instead of hers. Folks still use the apostrophe wrongly, as in "The instruction's for assembling," which is stuck on an inflatable camping bed I bought only recently. So I am encouraged to forgive when I hear "The job is rightfully your's." We would do well to remember that these punctuation rule's are there for a reason. When we hear these abominable misuse's, we are tempted to ask what student's are learning in their school's these days. Some of these error's are very annoying. You wonder what happened to the standards of yesterday's.

It is because of these abuses that Jeff Rubin, the Californian journalist whose anger at wrong punctuation earned him the title 'Punctuation Man', called for a National Punctuation Day. Now in its fifth year, there is still so much to learn about punctuation marks and how they are used. I recently signed on to become a member of Martha Brockenbrough's SPOGG (The Society for the Promotion of Good Grammar). The society "is for people who crave good, clean English- sentences cast well and punctuated correctly. It's about clarity. And who knows how many of the world's huge problems could be solved if we had a little more of that?" March 4th 2009 was a national Grammar Day. America may need a little more of good English, but we need a whole lot more. What does the language centre at university of Ghana do? The other day, jolly good fellow Kwesi Biney wrote about how the word 'drastic' has suddenly become popular in Ghana. If we have a body that monitors the use of language, as the French Academy does, these creative uses of language should be documented. Now, young men in America have a very cool way of proposing love to a girl: "Hey, you are so Obama." The girl would instantly decode the message as saying she is very cool or good-looking.