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National Punctuation Day: Professor's pet peeves

By Barbara Kay

I love grammar and punctuation in a deep, visceral way. So I actually suffer in a physical way when I see either abused.

And over a long career as an English teacher in the Quebec Cégep system, I suffered all the time. I must have marked thousands of exams and essays in my time, and am hard pressed to remember the pitifully few papers that didn't require corrections in both. My students' lack of rules training shocked me.

I have a few punctuation pet peeves. The first is the substitution of "it's" for "its." The rule is child's play to learn: The apostrophe is there as a placeholder for "is." If you can substitute "it is" for "it's," then you have the right locution. Otherwise it is a possessive, like "his" or "hers." Nobody ever writes "hi's" or "her's?" Sheesh.

Another is the use of the comma to separate two principal clauses: that is, two clauses with both a subject and a verb. Here a little more sophisticated intuition is necessary. In the case of extremely short clauses, it is permissible to use the comma to separate: "He came, he saw, he conquered" is, I think, a more felicitous construction than "He came; he saw; he conquered," and in my opinion much better than "He came. He saw. He conquered." Both of the latter constructions are correct though. The third option would appeal to those with a penchant for dramatic suspense in their writing.

On the other hand, one often sees longer principal clauses separated only by a comma: "She looked in vain for a taxi on the crowded street, then she realized there was a bus strike, so everyone was in the same boat she was." While the two latter clauses are appropriately linked by a comma, it is an inappropriate tool for joining the first two clauses. A semicolon would do.

A third pet peeve is the confusion of the colon and the semicolon. I know one very talented writer on the Post's editorial board who admits to an inability to distinguish between them, and it distresses him, as well it should. His high school English teacher should be horse-whipped! It stabs me to the heart to see a semicolon introducing a list or a conclusion or example, or a colon placed between two principal clauses to indicate the symbiotic balance that a semicolon would convey. I'm sorry, I can't go on with this peeve; it hurts too much.

It is only fair to end by admitting to my own punctuation fetish — I never use it in error, only in excess — and that is the use of dashes to set off a thought in a corollary, but not a necessary relationship to the principal clause. My fetish is probably someone else's pet peeve. And that, as they say, is what makes syntactical horse racing.