

The Palm Beach Post

Palm Beach, Florida

Stop! Pause, momentarily, to appreciate punctuation; National Punctuation Day begins

By SONJA ISGER

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Thursday, September 24, 2009

Comma, we pause, momentarily, to admire you. Exclamation! So rare to use you. Semi-colon you're not so common; at least you're a wink ;) at the end of our emoticon world.

All this commotion over punctuation is the result of a former newspaperman's love gone wild—and into official teacher calendars and Grammar Girl's web site.



Today marks the 6th annual National Punctuation Day.

The official NPD web site is rallying the love by asking bakers to recreate their favorite punctuation marks in something edible. (Can we question the wisdom of a question mark in meatloaf?)

“Grammar Girl,” the Dear Abby for the grammatically challenged, has put out the call for the people's odes to their favorites: Keep it under 200 words for the newsletter, 700 words for the podcast.

But Florida Atlantic University professor Robert Bailyn, now in his 11th year teaching aspiring writers,

is shaking his head.

“I can't say where grammar or punctuation is getting any worse. It's certainly not getting any better,” says Bailyn, who finds the comma most commonly trips up his students.

“It's all over the place. Some will put commas everywhere and some will use no commas whatsoever. Some make their readers constantly pause, while others don't let their readers catch their breath,” reports the former newspaper reporter and editor with the likes of Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Philadelphia Enquirer* on his resume.

So far gone you can't even spell ampersand?

Perhaps you could purchase an iPhone app.

Mastering English Punctuation goes for a mere \$3.99.

“Do you know when to use a semicolon versus a colon? Do you use too many commas? Are you deliberate with your paragraph breaks? Do you know the difference between a dash and a double dash? Between a dash and a hyphen?” Learn by wading through 102 multiple choice questions.

Can't spare that much change? How about this app for \$2.99:

Punctuation—A Primer of Information about the Marks of Punctuation and their Use Both Grammatically and Typographically.

(Isn't that already too long of a name for an application? And What's With All Those Random Capital Letters?)

But it's the other side of that technology—all those text messages and 140-word twitter posts—that worries some.

Says eighth-grade English teacher Lynore Valenza: “My kids know how to use punctuation. They choose not to. On this last assignment I even told them to put periods at the end of sentences and 50 percent did not.”

Valenza and her colleagues at Don Estridge Middle School in Boca Raton do not skip the grammar lessons, she assures. Students are simply more often immersed in the casual, thumb-typing world that opts for “w/” over the word “with” and skips periods altogether.

Says the professor, “You're just trying to pour everything in there and a comma is one of those 140 characters. Where's the poetry?”

Can vowel, or even word, appreciation day be far behind?

*Special thanks to Andrew on Grammar Girl's Facebook page for giving us reason to use this asterisk to credit him with a version of this line.