

# DAILY SOUND



## Santa Barbara, California

### Punctuate this

By Leslie Dinaberg  
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It's not often I get to interview someone on the phone and have them burst into song, but that's how excited Jeff Rubin gets about punctuation.

As the founder of National Punctuation Day (which is September 24), Rubin will go to great lengths — including singing a chorus of “Punctuation, punctuation. What is that? What is that?” to the tune of Frere Jacques — to get people to pay more attention to dashes, commas and semicolons.

He has also written a rap song (“An EXCLAMATION POINT is so like 'wow,' If you're writin' so excitin' then put me in now!”) and performs “Punctuation Playtime” with his wife Norma in school assemblies all over California.

This is a guy who really likes his parenthesis and question marks. )And; Since this is the kind of Column that is fateD to have at least one punctuation' error, no matter how hard I try, I figure that, I should; just own it?!(

A former journalist, Rubin says that “a proliferation of spelling, grammar and punctuation errors in newspapers that has since spread to magazines and books” motivated him to start the holiday in 2004. He wanted to bring attention to punctuation errors and the importance of punctuation in literacy.

“Lack of attention to punctuation really is a problem,” says a copyeditor I know, who has been in the business for more than 15 years.

“My students' command of the English language is getting worse and worse,” says a Community College English teacher.

It is feedback like this that keeps Rubin motivated to spread the word about how critical proper punctuation is to communication. Every year he tries to do something to engage the public and get them to respond to National Punctuation Day. “Last year I endorsed the serial comma and that was quite a firestorm of emails and hate mail. But it got people engaged and it got people talking about punctuation. That's what I want,” he says.

As a writer who works with several different editors in any given week, I've spent a fair amount of time wondering about whether I really care enough about the importance of serial commas, since every publication seems to have a different style.

Rubin certainly got a response last year from the Angry Grammarian, a.k.a. Philadelphia Weekly columnist Jeffrey Barg, who wrote, "Punctuation Man's got a lotta damn gall. I was having a perfectly pleasant National Grammar Day last week ... when his treasonous press release arrived: 'Punctuation Man breaks with Associated Press, endorses serial comma.'"

Slap fight!

Of course this is from another guy who makes his bread and butter on brackets and apostrophes. What about people who aren't writers? Do they care about punctuation?

Not surprisingly, teachers have been among the first to embrace the holiday. Rubin told me about a law school teacher at Kent State University who has her class do a punctuation play in honor of the holiday and a teacher in Michigan who designed a punctuation football game.

For this year's holiday Rubin is sponsoring a baking contest where entrants must send a recipe and a sample of their cookie, cake, pastry, doughnut, or bread baked in the shape of a punctuation mark to win prizes.

If you don't feel up to baking — or can't stomach giving away your cookies — Rubin offers another game plan to celebrate National Punctuation Day.

- Sleep late.
- Take a long shower or bath.
- Go out for coffee and a bagel (or two).
- Read a newspaper and circle all of the punctuation errors you find (or think you find, but aren't sure) with a red pen.
- Take a leisurely stroll, paying close attention to store signs with incorrectly punctuated words.
- Stop in those stores to correct the owners.
- If the owners are not there, leave notes.
- Visit a bookstore and purchase a copy of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*.
- Look up all the words you circled.
- Congratulate yourself on becoming a better written communicator.
- Go home.
- Sit down.
- Write an error-free letter to a friend.
- Take a nap. It has been a long day.

I think I'll do the list backwards and start with a nap.

*For more information about National Punctuation Day visit [www.nationalpunctuation-day.com](http://www.nationalpunctuation-day.com). When Leslie's not playing grammar police she can be reached at [Leslie@LeslieDinaberg.com](mailto:Leslie@LeslieDinaberg.com). For more columns visit [www.LeslieDinaberg.com](http://www.LeslieDinaberg.com).*