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## Saving language, one comma at a time

**Punctuation Day's founder leads fight on declining standards, 'lazy' sign screw-ups**

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Today used to be a relaxing holiday for Jeff Rubin.

He'd sleep late, have a nice National Punctuation Day breakfast with his wife and then spend the day roaming San Francisco in search of incorrectly punctuated signs. He'd take pictures and politely point out errors to business owners responsible for confusing "its" (possessive) with "it's" (a contraction for it is).

The evening might be spent consuming punctuation-related dishes or baked goods, such as the question mark-shaped meat loaf he made to commemorate National Punctuation Day in 2007. No, that's not a typo: Rubin shapes meat and cakes into punctuation marks.

It may sound bizarre, but the pet holiday that Rubin got *Chase's Calendar of Events* to bestow upon Sept. 24 just five years ago has gained enough notoriety that its creator plans to rise early today to bake an oatmeal-raisin cookie in the shape of a question mark live on Sacramento TV. Then he will devote the rest of the day to spreading the gospel of good grammar to media outlets from all over the world.

Such has been the growth in interest, in fact, that some people have suggested it's time to change the name to *International Punctuation Day*.

Bad punctuation isn't just something that offends the eyes and ears of language-arts fusspots.

Rogers Communications fought a lengthy legal battle with Bell Aliant in 2006 over a single misplaced comma in a contract. The CRTC initially allowed Aliant to back out of a contract involving power poles after one year and not the five Rogers intended.

Rogers eventually got the decision overturned — because the French-language version was less open to interpretation — but the entire mess cost some \$700,000 to settle.

Cases like that delight Rubin, a former reporter for the New York Post and the New York Daily News.

He founded National Punctuation Day to draw attention to America's lapsed grammar skills. And to appease his long-suffering wife, he says, who urged him to find a more constructive way "to channel my displeasure with print media" than swearing at the *San Francisco Chronicle* over morning coffee.

"I think we're getting lazy about a lot of things, and I think this is one of them," he says, on the phone from his home in Pinole, Calif.

"It's not the worst thing in the world if people don't know how to properly use an apostrophe, but it does say something about them: that they don't care to learn."

Email, text messaging, Twitter and poorly edited blogs are the latest targets for complaints about eroding language skills, but grammarians are not above turning on their own. After British writer Lynne Truss scored a bestseller with *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* in 2003, some of her contemporaries responded by itemizing the punctuation gaffes in the book.

"Why would a person who is not just vague about the rules but disinclined to follow them bother to produce a guide to punctuation?" wondered Louis Menand in *The New Yorker* at the time.

Egregious errors can make a business appear lax and unprofessional, as the website [ApostropheAbuse.com](http://ApostropheAbuse.com) likes to point out. It chronicles apparent screw-ups like the "Crest for Kid's" toothpaste packaging and a recent Fox News ad reading, "Nothing Get's By Greta."

Rubin's message is simple: "This is our language. Learn to use it properly. Have some dignity."