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John Kelly's Washington

Not to Put Too Fine a Point on It, This Guy Cares About Writing's Jots and Tittles

By John Kelly
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Hey, you! I have a question: Do you love punctuation? Do you find the dash — that sublime horizontal line — to be, well, dashing? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and obey the comma?

Do apostrophe catastrophes make you seethe? The cat licked it's paws. For sale: Hot tamale's.

And don't forget the period: There's simply nothing better than that tiny pinprick of ink to say, "I'm done, period."

If you are a punctuation lover — a lover of correct punctuation — then you probably woke up today as excited as a child on Christmas morning. For today is National Punctuation Day, the day to pull out all the stops, to revel in comma karma, to get to the exclamation point. It's a day for high colonics and high semicolonics.

"For some odd reason, I've always been interested in punctuation," Jeff Rubin, father of National Punctuation Day, told me on the phone from his home in Northern California. "It's just always been that one subset of literacy that has really intrigued me. . . . I still sit around and read the paper, and sometimes I have a red Sharpie in my hand. I play a little game: How many errors can I find today?"

The answer: too many.



Jeff Rubin, in punctuated superhero outfit, holds a question mark-shaped cookie. This year, a baking contest is part of National Punctuation Day. (Courtesy of Jeff Rubin)

Jeff started out as a newspaper reporter, a trade not always known for its rigorous fidelity to error-free writing. Jeff said: “I wanted to get everything right before it went to the copy desk: spelling, punctuation, grammar, style — everything. It’s an affliction, because it’s not possible, as you well know.”

I know, Jeff. I know.

One incident still galls. When Jeff was at the Norwalk (Conn.) Hour, he filed a story on the new director of the city’s housing authority.

“He was a very big guy,” said Jeff, who wrote his story using Associated Press style and described the man as “the 6-10 director.”

“And my editor changed it to ‘the six-to-ten director.’ And that’s how it ran in the paper. . . . I jumped all over him. I said, ‘. . . Don’t you know your own stylebook?’”

Jeff moved from newspapers to newsletters, which he produces for banks, credit unions, contractors and other businesses. A few years ago, he was ranting about the decline of proper punctuation when his wife said, probably in the way that only a wife can, “You really should find a way to channel your aggression in a more positive way.”

And thus was born National Punctuation Day. In 2004, Jeff managed to get it listed in an annual directory called Chase’s Calendar of Events, a.k.a. the lazy columnist’s best friend.

National Punctuation Day was originally Aug. 22, Jeff’s birthday. He moved it to Sept. 24 so it would fall during the school year. (“That’s the number that Willie Mays wore, and he was my idol,” he said. “It’s not scientific, but it’s memorable.”)

Jeff, 59, has a Web site: <http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com>.

Throughout the year, he and his wife, Norma Martinez-Rubin, visit elementary school classrooms, and he dresses as a caped superhero. He says he can make learning punctuation so much fun that in 45 minutes he can teach a third-grader to use a semicolon properly.

The semicolon is Jeff’s favorite piece of punctuation, for the simple reason that “virtually no one knows how to use it.” As for the most misused, it’s the apostrophe. Excuse me: It’s the apostrophe.

Jeff works hard to get publicity for his fledgling holiday. This year, he’s sponsoring a punctuation baking contest. Last year, he made the bold move of defying the Associated Press and endorsing the serial comma. That’s the one that goes before “and” in a series: The store’s ice cream flavors include vanilla, strawberry, chocolate, and banana.

Of that particular battle, Jeff said, “I heard from a lot of people who called me a heretic.”

Heretic. Superhero. Lover of the semicolon. Jeff Rubin is all of these things, just one man looking for comma ground in a world where most people don’t know their apostrophe from a hole in the ground.

“The holiday is just one day,” Jeff said. “On that one day, it’s not too much to ask people to be cognizant of using punctuation the way it’s intended to be used.”

Period.