



Veteran drudge John E. McIntyre writes about language, usage, journalism & arbitrarily chosen subjects.

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Brace yourself for Punctuation Day

National Punctuation Day is approaching, and if you want to be in shape for it—as should my Loyola students, or at least the ten of the fifteen who stayed signed up after reading the syllabus—you'll want to brush up on some basics.

If you want to stay clear about the comma, you should use it after an introductory subordinate clause, and you should not omit to use it when two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction. The comma, your friend, helps to mark off appositives, indicate pauses to replicate the rhythms of speech, and separate items in a series. If you always use the final comma in the series, the serial comma or Oxford comma, the Lord will smile on you and your house.

Do not fear the semicolon; it is handy as a quick link between two independent clauses without a conjunction. It is neglected by inexpert writers, who make comma splices instead; scorned by some writers, who think on idiosyncratic aesthetic grounds that it is ugly; and applied by skilled writers in a complex series, which is the other main function.

The colon can announce that a list or a quotation of some length is to follow, or it can announce a conclusion to which you are meant pay particular attention: do so.

Would-be professional writers are advised to learn that the hyphen joins compounds while the longer dash separates things, usually to indicate a break in continuity—a point not all journalists grasp.

You can use the apostrophe to indicate possession—girl's, girls', child's, children's, Jones's, Joneses'—and it's also OK to use it in contractions. But you mustn't use it to make nouns plural, as in the grocer's apostrophe (cantaloupe's), so don't.

In American English, use double quotation marks for the basic quotation, single quotation marks for a quotation inside a quotation, and periods and commas inside the quotation marks. Avoid using quotation marks to highlight individual "words," because that can look like skepticism.

Use parentheses to indicate aside remarks off the main line of the sentence (though journalists are addicted to dashes instead), and use square brackets when you interpolate explanatory material in quoted matter.

Would anyone use a question mark to indicate anything but a question?

The ellipsis, three periods in a clump, indicates something omitted from quoted matter or a mere trailing off ... But if an ellipsis ends a quotation, use a period as well.

When I was first editing Laura Vozzella's columns at *The Sun*, I used more exclamation points in the first couple of months than in the previous quarter-century. But you should limit yourselves to a handful in your career. If you overindulge, you risk sounding like a breathless adolescent girl!!!!

All things come to an end, and when they do, mark them with a period.