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## Comma to the rescue

### Lovers of the language rise up for National Punctuation Day

Friday, Sept. 24, 2010

By SUSAN CRATON  
Staff writer

It was an inevitable comment, as far as Dave Phalen was concerned.

Phalen, a professor of English, was teaching a general studies composition and rhetoric class at the Leonardtown campus of the College of Southern Maryland last Wednesday morning. He asked a student during class why he thought a comma should be inserted in a sentence.

"There's a pause?" the student suggested without much confidence.

Phalen was ready for that. He's been teaching English at CSM for 10 years now and he knows that students often come to the school not knowing punctuation rules very well. "Do you suppose that's really an official rule for using commas?" he asked. He noted that while a reader will often pause at a place appropriate for a comma, that's really not the reason it is there.



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Staff photo by REID SILVERMAN

Dave Phalen, a professor of English, goes over some rules for comma usage during a general studies composition and rhetoric class at the Leonardtown campus of the College of Southern Maryland last Wednesday.

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Phalen moved to the large whiteboard at the front of the classroom and began to outline some rules that really do govern comma usage.

He was pleasant. He didn't groan. It's his job.

As the class worked its way through an exercise, correcting a long list of faulty sentences, Phalen offered more tips on commas, semicolons (which he loves) and the evolution of colon usage. Phalen is one of those true believers in what he is teaching, interjecting comments like "this is again the magic and beauty of the English language" as he instructs.

Phalen is not alone in his defense of correct punctuation.

Jeff Rubin of Pinole, Calif., is the founder of National Punctuation Day, which is being celebrated today, Sept. 24. It's a day he advertises as "a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotation marks and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipsis."

In his everyday life, Rubin is the mild-mannered owner of a newsletter publishing business. But in his spare time, he is Punctuation Man, superhero to English majors everywhere. He wears a red cape decorated with a sewn-on exclamation point and visits schools and other venues fighting the good fight for correct comma, ellipsis and semicolon usage.

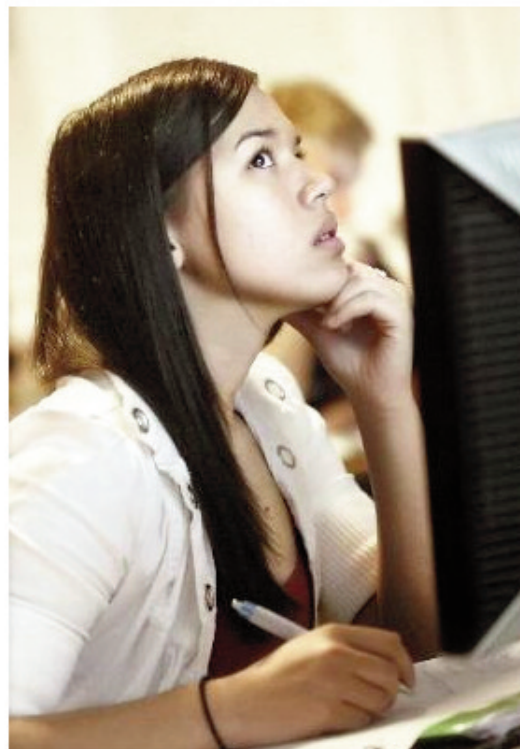
"My wife is Mrs. Punctuation. She refuses to wear a cape," he said during a telephone interview last week.



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Staff photo by REID SILVERMAN

Jeff Rubin of Pinole, Calif., aka Punctuation Man, in a submitted photo, prepares to give a presentation to children about proper punctuation at a mall in California.



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Leslie Olson of Lexington Park, a freshman at the College of Southern Maryland, considers a question during Dave Phalen's composition and rhetoric class at the Leonardtown campus last Wednesday.

At his Punctuation Playtime presentations, Rubin and his wife, Norma Martinez-Rubin, teach students a rap song about punctuation ("It's a very popular song," he said), hand out posters and other punctuation-related paraphernalia and teach the children about 13 punctuation marks.

"It's sort of a nonprofit mission," Rubin said.

National Punctuation Day was first celebrated in 2004. However it is not, to Rubin's disappointment, a government-sanctioned holiday at this point.

"We have tried to get Gov. [Arnold] Schwarzenegger to declare National Punctuation Day, but he didn't want to Californicate it ... The teachers' calendar recognizes it," he said, referring to "Chase's Calendar of Events."

"When my mother was alive, she recognized it," he added.

Being Punctuation Man allows Rubin to right the wrongs he sees in everyday writing — problems that steam this lover of following the rules. The worst? "Oh, it's the misappropriation of the apostrophe ... the fact that folks don't know how to use it," he said, when asked what punctuation problems are sure to set him off.

For example, when people use "it's" when they should use "its," Punctuation Man cannot remain silent. "This kind of stuff just fries me," Rubin said. "The apostrophe is so easy."

Rubin is serious about this. He notes that just as correct spelling is becoming a lost art among the texting generation and those who rely on spell check, punctuation skills are also increasing undervalued.

He said he's heard teachers "kicking around the idea" of letting students write papers in text-message language "because, hey, the kids are communicating this way," Rubin said.

"It's terrible," Rubin said. "They say that 'all I care about is that they understand the material.' But the material is English ... I'm sorry. No. No. No."

But "I'm just a 60-year-old fat guy walking around in a cape. Who listens to me?"

National Punctuation Day is a bid to make everyone listen to people like Rubin and Phalen. It's also a day to make the official Punctuation Day Meat Loaf to mark the day, maybe a write a haiku about proper use of a semicolon, maybe buy a fresh copy of Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style."

As Phalen finished up class Wednesday, Leslie Olson of Lexington Park, a freshman at CSM who is studying nursing, collected her books. "I learned something new ... the right way to use them," Olson said, nodding toward the notes about commas that Phalen had made on the board.

Olson's classmate, Daniel Bannister of Lexington Park, is working toward an electrical engineering degree. "This is the worst subject for me, because I'm not good at writing," Bannister said.

However, Bannister, like Olson, seemed to appreciate Phalen's taking the time to go over punctuation rules. "I don't recall a teacher ever explaining that to me before. I actually get that stuff now," Bannister said, noting that it might make a difference in his attitude now that he is in college and is paying for his education.

Back in his office after class, Phalen said he probably has a reputation for being a stickler for punctuation and grammar. "I mark it," he said.

"It's important, because it affects the meaning of what you're trying to get across ... it affects clarity."

Before this month, Phalen had not heard of National Punctuation Day. He seemed pleased, however, that there is such a day. Phalen didn't make a commitment to try his hand at the Punctuation Day Meat Loaf. But he said he'd post some information about the holiday for his students.