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## **English teachers share pet peeves on National Punctuation Day**

**By Dave Murray**

Note to students – :) is not a punctuation mark.

Alas, the smiley-face emoticon is starting to appear in essays as teens blur the lines between text messages and thoughtful academic fare.

Of course, such use is blasphemy to English teachers and others who hold proper grammar in high regard.

Area educators are paying special attention to commas, exclamation marks and serial commas today, the seventh-annual National Punctuation Day.

“Students really have to learn to separate their teen world from the academic world,” said Teisha Kothe, a 19-year veteran English teacher at East Kentwood High School.

She plans to dress like an exclamation point to note the special day.

“I’ve had essays with ‘IDK,’ which is text lingo for ‘I don’t know.’ I understand that this is their world and their culture. But I tell them that some things are OK for their Facebook pages, but not their essays.”

The holiday was created in 2004 by Jeff Rubin, a former reporter who became frustrated by the growing number of errors he found in newspapers, magazines and books.

“I was sitting at the kitchen table with a red Sharpie circling the errors with a fair amount of profanity,” Rubin said Thursday from his home outside San Francisco. “My wife doesn’t like profanity, and she said I really should find another way to channel my aggression.”

He came up with idea of a day saluting proper punctuation and submitted it to Chase’s Calendar of Events, a reference for notable and not-so-notable holidays and observations, including the recent Talk Like a Pirate Day.

The event was on Aug. 22 — Rubin’s birthday — for two years, but then was moved to September so teachers could celebrate proper use of question marks and colons in

lessons. Why the 24th? That's the uniform number of Willie Mays, Rubin's boyhood hero.

The event took off. Now Rubin curses less and spends more time talking to national media and educators across the country, including elementary students in Illinois writing haiku extolling the virtues of the apostrophe.

English professor Frederick van Hartesveldt III is celebrating with his Grand Rapids Community College students by showing video clips, including one in which "Seinfeld" characters debate the proper use of exclamation marks.

"I try to tell them that one exclamation mark works just fine," he said. "They don't have to use three or four."

Professor Jim Vanden Bosch used to walk around Calvin College, where he has taught English and grammar for 28 years, compulsively correcting fliers, posters, and other signs.

"I'm over that now," he said. "I'm 62, and I try to smile about it. It's either laugh or grind my teeth, and I like my teeth. But sometimes my left hand is mischievous and slips a pen into my right hand and some notations are made."

Vanden Bosch said the semicolon has become "virtually a lost cause" because so few students dare to use it.

And comma abuse is rampant on papers, with students sticking it in all sorts of places it doesn't belong, he said. Writers often stick quotation marks on words and phrases that don't need them, he said.

"They're not using them to show a quote; they're using them to say, 'I mean this emphatically,'" Vanden Bosch said. "This shows me that people desire to use punctuation, but they often don't have a clue about how to use it correctly."

Vanden Bosch blames a society that's increasingly moving away from the printed word,



**Jim Vanden Bosch, Calvin College professor**

**Punctuation peeve:** misplaced apostrophes

"I went to the farmers market once and noticed a sign, in crayon, reading 'green bean's.' That's not supposed to be possessive. I thought that was horrible. My wife went and bought two pounds of beans from the guy. Two years later, I'm still upset about it."

**Teisha Kothe, East Kentwood High teacher**

**Grammar gripe:** misused contractions

"Once I got a card, and the person wrote 'your' instead of 'you are.' I know I'm supposed to be happy I got a card, but I'm a stickler."

**Frederick van Hartesveldt III, Grand Rapids Community College professor**

**Punctuation peeve:** rampant comma use -- or not

"Students tend to use either way too many of them, or they don't use them enough."

**Cindy Wabeke, Jenison High School teacher**

**Grammar gripe:** texting shorthand

"I'm starting to see what I call 'Internet speak' popping up in rough drafts, things like 'UR' instead of 'you are.' I tell them that their formal essays are not the same as their social networking."

with its careful checking from copy editors and proofreaders, to more visual and quickly transmitted forms of expression.

He said college students start to realize the importance of their printed words and tend to be more serious about their punctuation — some even attempting semicolons. And he is eager to mark up the papers of those who fall short.

“I have a phalanx of sharpened pencils at the ready,” he said. “I can’t stop myself.”