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Punctuation errors can cost jobs, money, esteem

By William Loeffler

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For Jeff Rubin, spotting a punctuation error in a newspaper or book is like finding a fly in his soup. It renders the whole thing unfit for consumption.

“Punctuation is like the little lost stepchild of literacy,” says Rubin, a former newspaper reporter living in Pinole, Calif.

It’s a safe bet none of the world leaders meeting Thursday for the first day of the G-20 summit are aware that it’s also National Punctuation Day. Rubin founded it in 2004 after he got fed up with seeing misplaced apostrophes and other transgressions by people who should know better — newspaper reporters and editors, book publishers and billboard advertisers.

"No one cares," he says. "That’s my pet peeve, that a lot of people who are doing this don’t care. Where’s their pride? Where’s their self-esteem? Where’s their drive to get it right?"

Falling on Sept. 24, National Punctuation Day promotes literacy by encouraging schools and businesses to conduct activities, programs, games or contests related to the almighty comma, period and apostrophe. It’s listed in two directories published by McGraw Hill, *Chases Calendar of Events* and *The Teacher’s Calendar*.

Rubin also created a Web site, www.nationalpunctuationday.com, which lists the proper usage of punctuation marks and invites visitors to post photos of incorrect road or restaurant signs. This year, they’re also promoting a Punctuation Baking Contest, where entrants can submit recipes for cookies, cakes, pastries or bread baked in the shape of a question mark or other punctuation.

It may seem like a quixotic and thankless quest trying to eradicate signs in store windows that read "Children must be accompanied by parent’s." Or e-mail replies that say "Your welcome!" But those tiny marks are the mortar that hold our language together, say Rubin and other advocates.

Ken Gormley, interim dean of Duquesne University of School of Law, says attorneys aren't scoring any points with a judge if they submit a legal brief with punctuation errors.

"If your job is to communicate and be effective, if you have people stumbling over poor punctuation, they get distracted, and there's smoke coming out their ears because they see a semi-colon where there should be a colon," Gormley says. "The whole point is to be able to persuade them."

"If I get a cover letter that has a bad sentence or mispunctuation, that's a killer, much more so than on a resume," says Irving Firman, hiring shareholder at Tucker and Arensberg, a Downtown law firm. "A resume isn't really like anything else you're going to do for my firm, but a letter is something you're going to do every day."

Proper punctuation also is crucial in the business sector. In 2006, a misplaced comma cost a Canadian cable television company more than \$2 million when a court ruled that the errant squib changed the meaning of the company's contract with another firm.

Even so, it can be tough to advocate for strict punctuation rules without appearing like a Victorian chaperone making sure that boys and girls don't dance too close together.

Advocates have tried various approaches to put their message across. Rubin and his wife, Norma Martinez, devised "Punctuation Playtime," a 45-minute program of skits, contests and a "punctuation rap." They've performed it in nearly 80 schools around the country. In 2003, former BBC radio host Lynne Truss used Monty Pythonesque humor in her book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Gotham Books, \$12). It was a surprise best-seller.

Chris Studebaker uses "Seinfeld" when trying to impress the importance of punctuation upon his seventh grade students at Dorseyville Middle School, where he teaches language arts.

He'll show his students a scene from an episode where Elaine and her boyfriend bicker over the use of an exclamation point.

Even so, it's tough re-introducing the rigors of formal writing to students who have spent the summer text-messaging.

"The art of punctuating is something of a lost art," says Studebaker, 41. "It's going down the tubes. I think one of the biggest reasons is text and instant messaging. One of the themes I try to hammer home with the kids is that is they are not using chat room or text-messaging language in their writing."

Jamie Skye Bianco, assistant professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, says the concern over the debasement of punctuation is misplaced. Yes, texting and Facebook and Twitter are establishing their own rules for syntax and punctuation and will, for better or worse, have an effect on standard American English.

But language is constantly evolving, she says.

"This is just another step in that. It just happens to be one that's particularly sped up."

She points out that Shakespeare folios had radically different punctuation, and that some medieval manuscripts had none at all.

"There has never been, for any amount of time, consistent hard and set-forever rules of punctuation," she says.

A CASE IN POINT

If you think punctuation is trivial, see the paragraphs below:

Dear John,

I want nothing. From you, I find my heart and my hope. When you're not around life is a sad and sorry affair. Indeed, if a man like you would ever consider making a life with a girl like me, it would be a dream come true. If you jumped off a cliff, I would follow right after you.

Now change the punctuation.

Dear John,

I want nothing from you. I find my heart and my hope when you're not around. Life is a sad and sorry affair indeed if a "man" like you would ever consider making a life with a girl like me. It would be a dream come true if you jumped off a cliff. I would follow. Right. After you!

FAMOUS MOMENTS IN PUNCTUATION

1862: French novelist Victor Hugo reportedly telegraphed a message to publishers Hurst & Blackett to find out what they thought of his new book, "Les Miserables."

“?” He wrote.

“!” came the publisher’s reply.

1941: A Danish war refugee and pianist named Victor Borge invents phonetic punctuation. He reads a story on a radio program, “Bing Crosby’s Kraft Music Hall,” where he makes a specific noise for each period, dash and colon. There’s a lot of spit on the microphone when he’s finished, but listeners eat it up.

1962: Advertising executive Martin K. Speckter creates the interrobang, a combination of exclamation point and a question mark. It is intended for use with a question posed in an excited, incredulous voice, as in, “I just ate what?!”

1993: During the fifth season of “Seinfeld,” Elaine starts an argument with her boyfriend, Jake, because he wrote down a phone message saying “Myrna had her baby.” She thought he should have used an exclamation point for something that important.

2003: British author and former BBC radio host Lynne Truss publishes *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Gotham Books, \$12). She dedicates the book “To the memory of the striking printers of St. Petersburg who, in 1905, demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters, and thereby directly precipitated the first Russian Revolution.”

2006: A Canadian court rules that cable television giant Rogers Communications must pay more than \$2 million thanks to a misplaced comma. The comma in question changed the meaning of a contract between Rogers and Aliant Telecom. Rogers thought they had locked in a five-year rate for access to thousands of telecommunications poles. But the court ruled that the comma changed the meaning of the clause and gave Aliant the right to terminate the contract after one year. Obviously, someone hadn’t read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.