

Greetings!

Join us today in celebrating National Punctuation Day! What, you've never heard of such a thing? We hadn't either until we stumbled upon it while perusing Wikipedia. According to the source teachers love to hate: "National Punctuation Day is a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotes, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons, and the ever-mysterious ellipsis... Founded by Jeff Rubin in 2004, National Punctuation Day promotes the correct usage of punctuation."

In honor of this most wonderful day—ok, we admit we might be a little weird—we thought we'd provide a brief primer on punctuation.

Disclaimer alert: There are many style guides out there, including *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *ACS Style Guide*, and *MLA Style Manual* to name a few. They agree on most things, but there are some differences. Follow your company's style guide if one exists. We use *The Chicago Manual of Style* if our clients don't have a style guide, and that's where we found the following gems.

Let's start with the lowly comma. According to *Chicago*, the comma "indicates the smallest break in sentence structure. It denotes a slight pause. Effective use of the comma involves good judgment, with ease of reading the end in view." Items in a series are easier to read when separated by commas, but make sure you don't change the meaning of the sentence (think "eats, shoots, and leaves"; those poor pandas!). Use semicolons if the items in a series include internal punctuation or are long and complex. (While we were at the zoo, we saw elephants, monkeys, and giraffes; ate popcorn and ice cream; and watched a video about polar bears.) We could go on and on about the comma, but we'd bore you.

Did you know that in British English, quotation marks are used differently from how Americans use them? In American English, double quotation marks are used to enclose a standalone quote ("Hi there") and single quotation marks to enclose a quotation inside another quotation. ("And then she said, 'What do you mean you've never heard of National Punctuation Day?") The opposite is done in British English (read any British mysteries lately?). Quotation punctuation is also handled differently between the two languages. In American English, it's proper to put ending periods and commas inside the quotes; the Brits put them outside. In both languages, colons, semicolons, question marks, and exclamation points go outside the quotes unless they are part of the quoted matter. Check your style guide on this one. We have some clients who prefer all ending punctuation outside the quotation marks unless it's part of the quote.

We all know periods end a sentence. But did you know that if information within parentheses is a complete sentence, the period stays inside the parentheses with the sentence? Single spaces are acceptable after periods (and colons)—but check your style guide for hangers-on to pre-computer word processing). Periods are also used for abbreviations. Usually, if the abbreviated term is lowercase, you need a period (i.e., vol., etc.); if the term is upper case (VP, CEO, USA), you don't. We do a lot of scientific writing, and periods are not necessary with units of measure (ft, lb), with a few exceptions (like "in." for inch so as not to confuse with "in").

Semicolons don't need to be scary. We've already talked about using them in a series with internal punctuation. Think of the semicolon as "stronger than a comma but weaker than a period." Use a semicolon between two independent clauses (the dog is brown; it has big feet). Always use a semicolon before however and therefore (followed by a comma) when used transitionally between independent clauses. (She went to the store; however, she forgot her list.)

Ellipsis points indicate "the omission of a word, phrase, line, paragraph, or more from a quoted passage." Ellipses (three spaced periods [. . .]) must appear together on the same line. You can use a comma, semicolon, colon, question mark, or exclamation point before or after ellipses to make the phrases easier to read. It's also ok to capitalize the first word after the ellipses if what follows is a complete sentence.

So there you have it. You are now properly prepared to celebrate National Punctuation Day in style. And, if you discover your company doesn't have a style guide and should, don't hesitate to contact us. We'd be glad to put one together for you.

Happy punctuating!

Sincerely,

Kathy

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