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The road signs of writing, reading

I'm embarrassed. National Punctuation Day occurred last Friday, and I, an English teacher no less, missed the observation—entirely.

But then maybe that is just as well. National Punctuation Day, sad to say, is no celebration, not these days. In this, the age of texting and Tweeting, a day devoted to the comma and its brethren amounts to a National Day of Mourning.

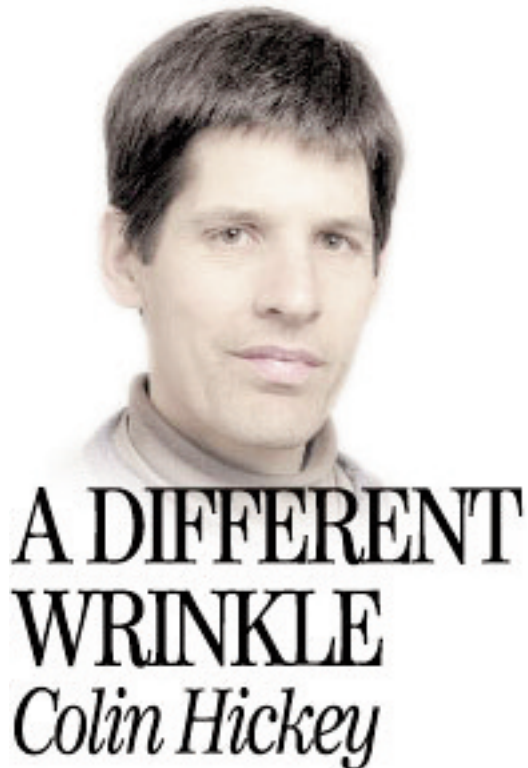
Rest assured, though, this will not be a rant about how a lazy, undisciplined, non-reading generation can't tell a colon from a semicolon, even though the latter complaint—the colon-semicolon issue—is hard to rebut.

Lazy and undisciplined, though, is unfair. I don't blame teenagers for confusing colons for semicolons, forsaking the comma and ignoring the apostrophe. They simply are responding to today's societal values and among the most highly esteemed values, if not No. 1, is speed.

Watch a teenager text on a cell phone sometime and this becomes apparent. His or her fingers are a blur, a lightning quick collection of digits rat-a-tatting out information with a missionary's zeal. From a young age, the importance of speed is programmed into our children. They learn that getting rich quick is part of the American dream. They learn that computers have to be fast in order to be good. They learn that the daily news cycle is a whirlwind and that stories need to be updated constantly to keep them fresh and relevant.

In this worldview, the stories found in the morning print newspaper are ancient history and those who consume their news from such sources are relics from a bygone era.

Which takes me back to punctuation.



Periods, colons, semicolons and commas are the road signs of writing and reading, signs that tell us to stop or slow down. But slow down is not in harmony with speed up.

Old-fashioned grammatical rules don't register to a generation raised on new-age digital devices. Does a teenager want to be slowed down by periods, semicolons and commas? Please. This is like asking whether a teenager would prefer boiled broccoli over a double cheeseburger with large fries.

So, alas, nobody should be surprised that National Punctuation Day came and went not with a bang but with a whimper. This does not mean, however, that we should resign ourselves to this situation.

The truth is that punctuation does matter. We need road signs in writing and reading as much as we need traffic lights and stop signs on our roads. To do otherwise invites chaos. We need periods and commas so that our sentences don't crash and clash and cause injury to meaning and clarity.

Therefore, I plan to celebrate National Punctuation Day next year. I will tell my friends about the event and encourage them to join me. I will not rest until I see concern for the comma begin to build. I have no choice. The stakes could not be higher. This is about survival of the English language.