

The Virginian-Pilot

September 24, 2010

Its - er, it's a grammarganza!

Today is the day for all stickler's to raise signs in support of - better punctuation...

Its National Punctuation Day, "a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotation marks, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons, and the ever-mysterious ellipsis," a description that may be improperly punctuated, and definitely has too many comma's.

The website devoted to the Holiday celebrates all manner of punctuation: Apostrophe's, [brackets], colons: commas, dashes, ellipses, exclamation points, hyphens, (parentheses), periods, questions? and "quotation" marks, and the dastardly semicolon.

That sounds like our kind of party. Heaven know's, we could all use the help.

As a people, American's probably right more then they ever have - e-mails, texts, tweets, posts are the stuff of electronic life. But we - OMG! - probably punctuate less, and certainly less correctly. Our usage is a horror, too.

Part of that is because grammars rules are both arcane and obtuse, and because a kind of punctuational relativism has taken over proper English, even the kind taught in school's.

Perhaps the most obvious of our failure's is the constant and grating misuse of the simple apostrophe, which we will stop misusing as soon as we finish this sentence. The proper places for apostrophes are to replace missing letters, as in a contraction, or to indicate possession. But that doesn't stop some from adding it before every S.

Our language transgressions are by no means confined to apostrophe abuse.

Some overeager writers will deploy commas as if the marks were glitter and they were 7-year-old girls decorating a poster of Justin Bieber, whatever that is.

WE, OF COURSE, KNOW OF NO SUCH COMMA SPENDTHRIFTS.

And, please, don't even get us started on the semi colon, which most people (including the folks behind the National Punctuation Day website), seem happier avoiding altogether, regardless of its necessity. The less said about quotation marks placed around "words" that aren't actually quotations, the better.

Our galloping misuse of English is especially troublesome because it's so unnecessary. Americans speak a language that has fewer rules than most, and yet many of us can't be bothered to follow them - a fact that makes every fifth-grade English teacher weep. (We're sorry, Mrs. Spohn.)

So, on this day of all days, we'd like to do our little part to make up to all those teachers who tried to prevent us from butchering the language. Get out your red pens, grammarians. Consider this piece, in all its intentional and unintentional grammatical horror, as a small gift to you on National Punctuation Day.