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By Alexandra Petri

## Happy, National Punctuation Day?!!,( )&



PETRI

Happy National Punctuation Day!

Now this is a day I can get, behind!

In honor of the day, here are the greatest punctuation marks:

**The semi-colon.** Semi-colons are great; without them, you'd have no way of convincing the people who read the A.P. U.S. History exam that you are some sort of tool. Some people use air quotes. I use air semi-colons, but only because I've never read anything by Jonathan Safran Foer, and I want to fit in among literary circles. Sometimes I use several at a time and collapse under a pile of semi-related clauses. Using a semi-colon says, "I have a thought, and I have another thought that is almost distinct from that thought, but not quite." No one really knows when it's appropriate to use a semi-colon, but I'd avoid them after Labor Day and during funerals.

Sentence with a semi-colon: Call me Ishmael; it's my name.

**The ampersand.** Are ampersands even a punctuation mark? These are only used by comic artists (Kavalier & Clay), lawyers (Dewey, Cheatham & Howe), and people who mistake them for treble clefs. Also, they show up a lot in graphic swearing, behind only #'s and those little graphics of thunderclouds.

Sentence with an ampersand: "I like to play the piano, but I mostly play on the & part of the piano. %\*&% piano!"

**The period.** If you line three periods up in a row, everyone becomes terrified that he or she missed something... Periods are the fat ladies of sentences. You just can't end without them. Sometimes, if you're experiencing period drama, you can hire some exclamation marks to come in as strikebreakers, but it's frowned on in most serious discourse! Question marks are totally useless in this area as well?

Sentence with a period: My favorite historical period is the one used in the Declaration of Independence after the word "separation."

**The comma.** I had an aunt who spent years in a comma! Commas are great in lists and in compound sentences, and they look sort of like pastries from a distance. I always add them to my shopping lists, because you can never have enough commas. The only thing worse than using too many commas is the fear you might run out and have to resort to desperate measures like run-on sentences or fragments.

Sentence with a comma: If you are conveying meaningless or redundant information, which doesn't mean anything or is redundant, try using a "which" clause!

Commas are also like a kinder form of parentheses.

**Parentheses:** Parentheses are a way of saying, "Hey, we don't really want you in this sentence, but we're going to accommodate you. Stay away from the real clauses." If you're hosting a party and don't know where to put the neighbor who's currently on trial for murdering his wife, try putting him in parentheses. He'll do less damage. Anything in parentheses is the kid sister of the rest of the sentence. The parentheses themselves are those two friends you encourage to shadow your younger sister when she comes to visit you at college. They're reliable, but no fun. If the sentence is cool, it puts commas around whatever the statement was, so it feels wanted. Example: "She loves colons, according to Jeff, anyway." "According to Jeff, anyway" feels much happier in that sentence than it did in the sentence, "She hates colons (according to Jeff, anyway)."

Sentence with parentheses: Keep the canapes away from (Strangler Don).

**The colon.** It is difficult for sentences to survive without functioning colons. I had a colonoscopy, and they said mine were in great shape. (I was contractually obligated to make some sort of reference to colonoscopies.) Colons are great, because you don't know what's going to follow them! It could be something exciting or dangerous, like a charging zebra! Or it could just be an ordered list.

Sentence with a colon: That was a sentence with a colon.

**The question mark:** Who doesn't love question marks? These are great, because if you use text-to-speech software, it doesn't put a rising intonation on them! It's horribly confusing! Does all text-to-speech software have one of those impediments where you don't recognize emotion? They're also great because they can unnerve people if you accidentally type them in the course of online conversations. Example: "I love you?"

Sentence with a question mark: What?

**Quotation Marks:** What can't these do? They can imbue your remarks with ironic distance or make you appear to be quoting someone. Or both! "This is what Abraham Lincoln would have called a 'quandary,'" you can say. "Those air quotes aren't mine, they're Abe's." You can pepper your conversation with these to appear cultured! If you fail, you'll show up on [this blog](#). Also, they tell you who's talking. Never let your dialogue leave home without them, unless you're James Joyce.

Sentence with quotation marks: You're going to be serving "six" years in a "federal" penitentiary.

**The exclamation point.** Exclamation points are the princes of punctuation! In the world of new media, they have carved out a niche as the only form of punctuation that doesn't make your e-mails sound as though they were written by someone who, after hitting the send button, is going to go jump off a bridge.

Example:

Dear Jeff:

I noticed that you got the files I sent. That's good. I hope you're happy with the graphics. Have a good day. Earlier, I saw a parade. I couldn't help wondering what the point of it was. Who knows. Anyway, enjoy your life.

Contrast this to:

Dear Jeff:

I noticed that you got the files I sent! That's good! I hope you're happy with the graphics! Have a good day! Earlier, I saw a parade! I couldn't help wondering what the point of it was! Who knows! Anyway, enjoy your life!

The first one makes it sound as though, after writing the e-mail, the author wandered into a river with rocks in her pockets. The second one makes her sound like a maniac, but the good kind of maniac, the kind who is really efficient at making graphics!

Sentence with exclamation point: In college, my editor told me that I used more exclamation points than any other columnist! [Editor's note: He was right, Alex.]

Further sentence with an exclamation point: Happy National Punctuation Day!

By Alexandra Petri | September 24, 2010; 11:17 AM ET

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