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AT RANDOM: ON LANGUAGE

Don't get carried away on National Grammar Day

By Nathan Bierma

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I will have mixed feelings next week on National Grammar Day, March 4.

I confess: I'm one of those people who cares about the difference between a gerund and a participle, between a restrictive and non-restrictive relative clause. This puts me in a tiny minority of deranged grammatical eccentrics -- people you should generally try to avoid.

But I have converted from my former life as a grammar prosecutor.

Laid-back grammarian

Only now do I know the truth: Sometimes it is best to follow the conventions of standard written English, as quirky, arbitrary and illogical as they often are (explain to me why "aren't I?" is considered grammatically correct?).

But most of the time -- when we're among friends, family, or anyone we feel comfortable with -- we should simply let our hair down and allow our unpolished emissions of language to burst out of us in all their untidy splendor.

Try to talk to your friend on the phone the way you would write for an English teacher in a classroom, and you'll sound ridiculous, not to mention unfriendly.

So I can't join the witch hunt of the Society for the Promotion of Good Grammar (which goes by the unappetizing acronym of SPOGG), which is sponsoring National Grammar Day as a chance to flag any violation of standard English usage in any situation.

"If you see a sign with a catastrophic apostrophe, send a kind note to the storekeeper," urges SPOGG at nationalgrammarday.com. "If your local newscaster says 'Between you and I,' set him straight with a friendly e-mail." Such corrections are seldom friendly, welcome or necessary. They are usually self-righteous, irritating and misinformed.

Grumpy Martha

The policewoman behind National Grammar Day and SPOGG is Martha Brockenbrough, who

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serves as grammar guru for Microsoft's Encarta Web site (encarta.msn.com), where she writes a column called "Grumpy Martha's Guide to Grammar and Usage."

There she urges readers to avoid using an adverb with a word like "unique" (too bad for our founding fathers, who dreamed of "a more perfect union"), and to avoid saying "decimate" unless you mean "reduce by one tenth" (if 10 percent of educated English speakers know and care about that distinction, I'll give Grumpy Martha one tenth of my candy bar).

Brockenbrough reprimands pop stars for grammar gaffes in song lyrics, including Bryan Adams for singing "if she ever found out about you and I" (it should be "you and me," she says) -- even though that's the best way to rhyme with the line before it: "She says her love for me could never die." And she takes Elvis to task -- is no one sacred? -- for singing "I'm all shook up" instead of the proper "all shaken up."

Raise your hand if you prefer this correction. That's what I thought.

Keep it civil

A more level-headed grammatical authority is Mignon Fogarty -- known to her Web visitors and podcast listeners as Grammar Girl (grammar.quickanddirtytips.com). She told me by e-mail that she likes the idea of having a day set aside for civil discussions about grammar and usage, as long as they stay civil.

"I hope that instead of getting caught up in the wicked glee of attacking signs with misplaced apostrophes or sending nasty notes about typos to editors, participants focus on spreading the word about the style points and grammar myths that many people latch on to as truth," Fogarty said. "For example, some publications use serial commas and some don't; it's OK to split infinitives; and sometimes it's acceptable -- even preferable -- to end a sentence with a preposition. It's shocking, but true!"

And please, leave Elvis alone!

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