Punctuation

Punctuation enables a reader to understand your intent and to follow your ideas. Without these linguistic “clues,” the reader may become very confused! Although there are general rules for punctuation use, punctuation can also be determined by a style guide or the rhetorical intentions of the writer.

Comma

The comma is used in the greatest variety of circumstances. There are two styles: the closed style (heavy use) and the open style (light use). Academia typically prefers the former. Here are the most common uses of the comma:

• To separate items in a list. Use a comma before the conjunction to avoid confusion.
  *Ex. He loves birds, poetry, and music.*

• To separate coordinated main clauses.
  *Ex. Cars will turn left, and coaches will turn right.*

• To mark the ends of an introductory or prepositional phrase of more than four words.
  *Ex. After graduating from high school, Jim went to college.*

• To separate a series of adjectives that each qualifies a noun in the same way.
  *Ex. John is a cautious, reserved person.*

• To mark the beginning and end of a parenthetical word or phrase.
  *Ex. I am sure, however, that it will not happen.*

• To distinguish indirect from direct speech.
  *Ex. “He did get excited,” he said.*

• To separate a participial phrase or a verbal phrase.
  *Ex. Having had breakfast, I went for a walk.*

Semicolon

The semicolon is a kind of “super comma”; it separates sentence parts that need a more distinct break than a comma can signal. Here are the uses of the semicolon:

• To unite two sentences that are closely connected without a conjunction.
  *Ex. The evil lover is not prudent; he is simply wicked.*

• It separates coordinate clauses in long, complex sentences.
  *Ex. But Elizabeth was not formed for ill-humor; and though every prospect of her own was destroyed for evening, it could not dwell long on her spirits.*

• It separates items in a series when any element in the series contains a comma.
  *Ex. I wish to thank Jon; Emily; Roger, who is 28 today; and Joe.*
Colon
The colon promises the completion of something just begun and can only be used after a noun. A colon should be used in the following instances:

- To introduce a phrase that explains a statement made in the preceding clause, often cause and effect or question and answer models.
  Ex. The evidence did not resolve the real question: whether Jackson is guilty.

- To introduce a list of items.
  Ex. The meetings are scheduled on the following dates: Oct. 6th, Nov. 7th, and Dec. 8th.

- To introduce a quotation when the quote follows a noun.
  Ex. Marshall notes a similar situation: "Students make punctuation errors when they are hurrying to finish papers on time."

Dash
The dash, longer than a hyphen and always informal, can be used in two ways:

- To replace a colon in connecting phrases.
  Ex. Beowulf could have been composed only by a genius—it is a wonder.

- To replace commas around a parenthetical phrase.
  Ex. John—who we all know is a genius—got a perfect score on his SATs.

Apostrophe
The apostrophe does primarily two things:

- Indicates the possessive case.
  Ex. Jon’s magazine is on the table.

- Indicates missing elements of a contraction.
  Ex. Don’t, for do not.

Possessives
- Singular - simply add – ‘s to most singular nouns, even those ending in “s”, e.g. Jon’s, Jones’s, witness’s.
  Exceptions:
  - Biblical and Classical names ending –’s take only an apostrophe, e.g. Jesus’
  - Words formed from a plural take only an apostrophe, e.g. General Motors’

- Plural – simply add an apostrophe to final -s, e.g. bosses’
  Exception: For plurals not ending in –s, simply add ‘s, e.g. men’s, children’s.

- Absolute – no apostrophe is needed, e.g. his, hers, yours