BASIC RULES OF PUNCTUATION

COMMA (,)

When to use:

- **Before a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, so, far, yet) to connect independent clauses**
  He frowned, but she did not understand why she was worried.

- **After most introductory words, phrases or clauses**
  After the noisy party, the neighbors complained.

- **Before and after extra (nonrestrictive) information included in a sentence ("extra commas for extra information")**
  My father, a computer programmer, works late at night.

- **Around transitional expressions**
  The ending, however, is disappointing.

- **To separate three or more items in a series**
  They ordered eggs, bacon, and potatoes.

- **Between coordinate evaluative adjectives**
  We ate a delicious, well-prepared, and inexpensive meal.

- **After a verb that introduces a quotation**
  She gasped, "We haven't a moment to lose!"

When **not** to use (* highlighted comma shows incorrect usage)
Do not use a comma to:

- **To separate a verb from its subject**
  Interviewing so many women in the United States, helped the researcher understand the "American Dream"

- **Within a compound structure when the second part of the compound is not an independent clause**
  Amy Tan has written novels, and adapted them for the screen.

- **After a coordinating conjunction that connects two sentences (comma goes only before conjunction)**
  The Joy Luck Club is supposed to be good, but, I missed it when it came to my local theater.

- **To connect two independent clauses when no coordinating conjunction is present**

Amy Tan has written novels, they have been adapted for the big screen. (Use semicolon instead)

- **To separate an independent clause from a following dependent clause introduced by after, before, because, if, since, unless, until, or when**
    The test results were good, because all the students had studied in groups.

- **To separate a clause beginning with "that" from the rest of the sentence**
    The girl in Tan's story tried to convey to her mother, that she did not have to be a child prodigy.

    Note: A comma can appear before a "that" clause when it is the second comma of a pair before and after extra information inserted as a nonrestrictive phrase.
    ➢ *He skates so fast, despite his size, that he will probably break the world record.*

- **To separate a verb from its object or complement**
    The qualities required for the job are, punctuality, efficiency, and the ability to work long hours.

- **After "such as"**
    They bought kitchen supplies such as, detergent, paper towels, and garbage bags.

SEMICOLON (;)

Use a semicolon instead of a period when the ideas in two independent clauses are very closely connected and you want readers to expect more.

When to use
- **Connect two independent clauses with a semicolon to avoid a run-on sentence or a comma splice**
    Biography tells us about the subject; biographers also tell us about themselves.

- **To separate items in a list containing internal commas**
    When I cleaned out the refrigerator, I found chocolate cake, half-eaten; some canned tomato paste, which had a blue fungus growing on the top; and some possibly edible meat loaf.

Do not use
- **Semicolons interchangeably with colons.**
    They contributed a great deal of food; salad, chili and dessert. (Use a colon instead)

- **After an introductory phrase or dependent clause, even if the phrase or clause is long.**
    Because the training period was so long and arduous for all the players; the manager allowed one visit by family and friends. (Use a comma instead)

Note: Do not overuse semicolons. Use them in place of a period only when the link between the two independent clauses is strong.

COLON (:)

Colons serve two functions: (1) that a writer is introducing a quotation or a list of items and (2) that a writer is separating two clauses of which the second expands or illustrates the first.

When to use
- **After an independent clause to introduce a list**
  The students included three pieces of writing in their portfolios: a narrative, an argument, and a documented paper.

- **After an independent clause to introduce an explanation or elaboration**
  The author has performed a remarkable feat: she has maintained suspense to the last page.

Note: You may use a capital letter after a colon introducing an independent clause. Be consistent in your usage.

Do not use
- **Directly after a verb (such as a form of *be* or *include*)**
  The two main effects were: the improvement of registration and an increase in the number of advisers. (No punctuation necessary)

  The book includes: a preface, an introduction, an appendix, and an index. (No punctuation necessary)

- **Directly after a preposition or "such as"**
  They packed many different items for the picnic, such as: salsa, pita bread and egg rolls. (No punctuation necessary)

DASH (—)

Dashes suggest a change of pace. They alert the reader to something unexpected, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. Form a dash by typing two hyphens, putting no extra space before, between, or after them.

- ➢ Armed with one weapon—her wit—she faced the crowd.
- ➢ The accused gasped, "But I never—" and fainted.

Commas can be used to set off appositive phrases, but dashes are preferable when the phrase itself contains commas.
- ➢ The contents of her closet—lightweight shirts, shorts, and sandals—made her reassess her readiness for winter in New England.