Common Errors Caused by Incorrect Punctuation

COMMAS

Commas are our friends. They help us to separate and to clarify sentences. However, some students tend to like commas a little too much, and the overuse of commas can result in a number of mechanical errors.

When to Use a Comma:

In a List
Commas belong between all items in a series, INCLUDING the last two.

> *"I had toast, eggs, hot chocolate, and a muffin for breakfast."*

The Oxford/Serial Comma
The Oxford/serial comma is a comma used immediately before the coordinating conjunction that precedes the final item in a list. Some writers choose or have been taught to omit this comma.
The Error: Omitting the comma may result in a confusing sentence.

> *"I would like to thank my parents, God and President Obama."*

The Fix: Just use the comma to avoid confusion, but remember that the AP Stylebook (among few others) opposes the use of this comma.

> *"I would like to thank my parents, God, and President Obama."*

After an Introductory Word Group
A comma belongs after adverb clauses, prepositional phrases, and participial phrases that serve as an introductory phrase. It may be omitted if a short clause won't be misread.
The Error: The *dangling modifier* is a common mistake that occurs following the use of an introductory phrase. A dangling modifier results when the subject of the following clause doesn't name the actor of the preceding introductory phrase.

> *"After reading Harry Potter, Twilight can be deemed mediocre."*

The Fix: The best way to fix this error is to restructure the sentence so that the actor is named either in the modifier or immediately following introductory modifier.

> *"After reading Harry Potter, I deem Twilight to be mediocre."*

SEMICOLONS

The semicolon is not like a comma. In fact, it is nothing like a comma, although many students tend to use them interchangeably.

When to Use a Semicolon:

Between Independent Clauses
Semicolons are used between two independent clauses that are not joined with a coordinating conjunction.

The Errors:
Comma Splices occur when two independent clauses are incorrectly joined together by a comma.

> *"I had toast for breakfast, it was burnt."*

The Fix: Replace the comma with a semicolon OR use a period to make each clause into its own sentence OR Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction between clauses OR restructure the sentence altogether.

However/Therefore Splices: The comma splice caused by the use of a comma preceding a coordinating adverb. There is a common misconception that the words "however" and "therefore" are conjunctions and can be used to join two independent clauses. This is not the case.

> "I had toast for breakfast, however it was burnt so I did not eat it."

The Fix: A semicolon belongs before a coordinating adverb if it separates two independent clauses.
> "I had toast for breakfast; however, it was burnt so I did not eat it."

Transitional Expressions are phrases such as "in fact," "as a result," and "for example" that are used between two independent clauses.
The Error: No one seems to know how to punctuate these. Ever.

> "I like dogs, in fact, I'm glad we got to play with Millie today."

The Fix: Unless you are using them parenthetically (and so would be placed between two commas), transitional expressions requires a semicolon to precede them to avoid creating a splice.
> "I like dogs; in fact, I'm glad we got to play with Millie today."

In A Series
A semicolon can also be used between items in a series that contains internal punctuation.
The Error: An excess of commas in a list that creates unnecessary confusion.
The Fix: Use semicolons in between the items of the series to separate them from one another.
> *"Recent sites of the Olympic Games include Athens, Greece; Salt Lake City, Utah; Sydney, Australia; Nagano, Japan."*

COLON

Colons are rarely used correctly. It is used primarily after an independent clause to call attention to the words that follow it.

When to Use a Colon:

To Introduce a List
Colons direct a reader's attention to a list.
The Error: Using a colon to introduce a list that has already been introduced by the words "including," "for example," or "such as."

> *"I bought groceries, including: ice cream, carrots, and soy milk."*

The Fix: Remove either the introductory phrase or the colon.

> *"I bought groceries: ice cream, carrots, and soymilk."*

To Introduce a Quotation
Use a colon to introduce a quote.

> *You know what they say: "All's fair in love and war."*

With Appositives
An appositive is a noun or pronoun that renames a nearby noun or pronoun.

> *"My roommate is guilty of two of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and sloth."*

To Emphasize/Explain (uncommon usage)
Use a colon to join two independent clauses when the first one can be used to emphasize, summarize, or explain the second clause.

> *"Road construction in Dallas has hindered travel around town: parts of Main, Fifth, and West Street are closed during the construction."*

Other Common Misuses of Punctuation

Lack of Punctuation
The Error: Fused run-on sentences occur when there is no punctuation nor connecting word or conjunction between two independent clauses the sentence ends up not making sense.
Note: Despite it being common belief among tutees, long sentences are not necessarily run-on sentences.

Periods or Semicolons Following Incomplete Sentences
The Error: Sentence fragments occur when periods or semicolons are used after an incomplete sentence. Like so. It's important to observe that some skilled writers choose to use fragments. For emphasis.

'Single' Quotes:
Should ONLY be used when quoting dialogue or a quote within another quote or other dialogue.
> *Mom said, "Mark said to Sara, 'you should jump off a bridge.'"*

"Quotation Marks:*"
Should be used only with direct quotations copied from a source (remember to cite at the end), with lines of dialogue, or to indicate the title of a small work (chapter title, short story, song, TV show episode, etc.)
Quotation marks should be used when referring to a word or a letter as itself; for example, the word "gray" is spelled with an "a" in American English but with an "e" in British English.
The Errors: Using quotation marks with "slang" terms or "colloquial" words. They are the written equivalent of "air quotes" and are "unnecessary."
Using quotation marks with indirect or block quotations.

*Note: In American English, punctuation belongs INSIDE quotation marks, whether it belongs to the quote or not.
**Also note that Only one ending punctuation mark is used with quotation marks. The stronger punctuation mark wins.

Punctuation for Emphasis: Commas, Parentheses, Dashes
Parenthetical commas, parentheses, and dashes are all used to place emphasis on certains words or phrases. Parentheses place more emphasis on the enclosed content than commas, and dashes emphasize the content more than parentheses.

Multiple Consecutive Punctuation Marks
The only time it is acceptable to use multiple punctuation marks is with ellipses...Or if you're a 16-year-old on Facebook.
Ellipses should only be used to indicate the omission of words from a quote. Again, skilled writers may use ellipses to indicate one's thoughts trailing off and thus the resulting sentence is incomplete.