Common Punctuation Errors

Places you’re likely to make a mistake:

1. At the end of a sentence
2. When you have quotations, citations, or parentheses
3. When you haven’t memorized the rules
4. When you need to make a judgment call

Watch out for these common errors!

**At the ends of sentences:**

1. The doubled period
   - **Rule:** One period at a time, please!
     - Don’t do this: I forgot to bring my I.D.

2. Unnecessary emoting
   - **Rule:** If it’s a statement, a period will suffice.
     - Beowulf is an epic adventure story that is as fresh today as ever!
     - In this essay, I focus on Grendel’s apparent lack of motivation for his actions…

**When you have quotations, citations, and parentheses:**

1. Introducing a quotation improperly
   - **Rule:** Introduce a quotation with an initial phrase and a comma or an initial clause and a colon.
     - According to Jones, “Blah blahblah.”
     - The shortest verse in the Bible makes a powerful emotional statement: “Jesus wept.”

2. Using too much punctuation
   - **Rule:** If introduce a quotation by fitting it grammatically into the sentence, omit the comma or colon.
     - We know from John 11:35 that “Jesus wept.”

3. Putting the comma in the wrong place or using it unnecessarily
   - **Rule:** If the sentence continues after the quotation, you’ll usually need a comma after your quotation but before your final quotation mark.
     - “I wish this workshop were over,” John said.
     - “Not me,” Mary replied, “I’ve got to go to the dentist this afternoon.”
   - **Rule:** If the quotation ends in an exclamation point or question mark, omit the comma.
     - “I hate going to the dentist!” John bellowed.
     - “Why are you talking so loudly?” asked Mary.
4. Putting punctuation outside the quotation marks
   - Rule: If the sentence ends with the quotation (and if there is no parenthetical citation), put your final mark of punctuation inside the quotation marks.
   - “That dog is bigger than a Denali!”
   - “I don’t think so; Denalis are quite large.”

5. Punctuating citations improperly
   - Rule: If your sentence ends with a footnote, put the superscript number after your final mark of punctuation.
   - According to Car and Driver, the Denali is ‘among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles.’
   - According to Car and Driver, the Denali is ‘among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles’ (Csere 20).
   - Rule: If the sentence ends with a parenthetical citation, omit the punctuation at the end of the quotation (unless it is a ? or a!).
   - Smith urges clients to ask, “What are you doing with your life?” (qtd. in Jones 15).

6. Letting your quotation take over your sentence
   - Rule: Remember that the end-of-sentence punctuation must fit with the whole sentence—not just the quotation.
   - If Csaba Csere says that the Denali is ‘among the most agile of full-sized sport utility vehicles’ (20), then why shouldn’t I get one for my sixteenth birthday, Dad?

7. Failing to indicate a quotation within a quotation
   - Rule: If you have a quotation within a quotation, standard American usage indicates that you double the outermost quotes (”) and use single quotes for the inner quotations (’).
   - My dad said to me, “Your so-called ‘best friend’ was just over here asking if you could loan her some money. I told her ‘absolutely not.’”

8. Setting off parenthetical phrases or clauses improperly
   - Parenthetical phrases and clauses need to fit the grammar of the whole sentence.
   - My brother was driving, and I was jealous. (I was only thirteen that winter.)
   - My brother was driving, and I was jealous (I was only thirteen that winter).
   - My brother was driving (I was thirteen), and I was jealous.
   - My brother was driving, and I was jealous (was I thirteen that winter?).
   - Avoid overusing parentheses in academic writing.

When you need a rule:

1. Capitalization
   a. Always capitalize the first word of a sentence.
   b. Except in special cases (e.e. cummings), always capitalize proper names or official titles.
   c. Preserve capitalization in quotations unless you have good reason for doing otherwise (a publisher’s standards, for instance). If you must change the case of a letter, put the letter in brackets.
d. Do not capitalize abstract nouns.

2. Commas
   a. Use a comma to join two sentences with “and,” “but,” or “or.”
      - You cook, and I’ll do the dishes.
      - ‘ll cook and do the dishes
   b. Use a comma after an introductory word group.
      - If you cook, I’ll do the dishes.
   c. Use a comma between items in a series.
      - I’d rather not do the cleaning, laundry, or dishes.
   d. Use a comma to set off added information only if that information is not absolutely necessary.
      - My mother, who is a college professor, hates her job.
      - I am looking for a college professor who hates his job. [no comma]
   e. Use commas to set off transitions.
      - It was cloudy this morning, but, in fact, it did not rain.
      - It was cloudy this morning; however, it did not rain.
   f. Use commas to make reading easier.
      - Unlike Joe, Catherine loves to sing.
      - To err is human; to forgive, divine.
      - Well, things didn’t go well; what happened, happened.
   g. Use commas to set off direct address or quotations.
      - John, would you come over here?
      - ‘John,’ she shouted, ‘would you come over here?’
   h. Do not use a comma every time you breathe.
   i. Do not use a comma whenever it seems like you (maybe, perhaps, possibly) should.

3. Apostrophes
   a. Apostrophes create contractions.
      - I don’t like him very much.
      - Steak n’ Shake is a great restaurant.
   b. Apostrophes indicate possession.
      - My mother’s job is better than all my brothers’ jobs put together.
      - Dickens’s later works are much darker than his early novels.
   c. Do not use an apostrophe to form a plural.
   d. Remember: “it’s” = “it is,” but “its” is the possessive form.

Judgment calls:

1. Colons versus Semicolons
   a. Colons and semicolons express a relationship between two halves of a sentence.
   b. Colons indicate that the second half of the sentence proceeds from the first half. Colons mean ‘that is’ or ‘what I mean by that is...’
   c. Semicolons create a list (but no stronger relationship than that). They mean ‘and’ or ‘also.’
   d. Colons
      i. Use them when the second half of the sentence further explains the first half:
         - John is a very emotional person: he cries at the drop of a hat.
         - I got just what I wanted for my birthday: a Denali.
ii. Use them to introduce a list that does not flow naturally with the rest of the sentence:
   · The classroom was a cacophony of the sound sounds of 2007: iPods, cell phones, and laptops.

iii. You do not need a colon if the list fits into the grammar of the sentence:
   · My favorite foods are chicken cacciatore, boeuf en daube, and Cheesy Westerns.

e. Semicolons
   i. Semicolons connect independent clauses in a ‘both-and’ relationship.
      · My brother was sixteen years old that winter; I was thirteen.
      · He had a Mustang; I, however, wanted a Denali.
   ii. Semicolons separate items in a list when commas are not strong enough to do so.
      · I bought fruits such as apples, pears, and bananas; meats such as chicken and pork; and cereals such as Cheerios, Kix, Crispix, and Circus Fun.

2. Dashes
   a. Dashes indicate a full stop—a very strong pause in the sequence of a sentence:
      · I cannot write without dashes—I sprinkle them like salt and pepper in my prose.
   b. Dashes set off appositives (parenthetical expressions):
      · My mother—a college professor—encouraged me to take my math classes my freshman year.
   c. Hyphens and dashes are not the same thing.
   d. Avoid overusing dashes in formal writing (often colons or semicolons can be substituted).

3. Hyphens
   a. Hyphens create compound words.
      · I have ninety-four Penguin editions.
   b. Hyphens make adjectives out of nouns.
      · The woman was an African American. a The woman was African-American.
      · I like literature from the nineteenth century. a I like nineteenth-century literature.
   c. Do not use hyphens to introduce quotations.

4. Ellipses
   a. Ellipses indicate that something has been omitted.
      · Paul urges, ‘Present your bodies … holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom. 12:1).
   b. If you end a sentence with an ellipsis, you need FOUR periods instead of three.
   c. Do not use ellipses to create dramatic effect (especially in formal writing).
      · The results of this study were surprising to the researchers.…
   d. Ellipses may or may not be enclosed in brackets (depending on your citation style).
   e. If at all possible, avoid using too many ellipses.

Remember: If in doubt, ask your professor!