USE THE COMMA (,)
1. To separate items in a series.
   ✓ (series of words) – Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors attended the assembly.
   ✓ (series of phrases) – She got paint on her shirt, on her shoes, and in her hair.
   ✓ (series of clauses) – They came to the party, they drank all the beer, and they refused to leave.

   **Note:** Some writing guides suggest leaving out the last comma in a series: Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors attended the assembly.

2. To set off all types of **nonrestrictive elements** (information not necessary to the meaning of the core sentence).
   ✓ New Orleans, home of the po-boy sandwich, is a fascinating city.
   ✓ The marsh, once full of wildlife, is now covered in oil.
   ✓ John, who knows everything about physics, can’t boil an egg.

   **Note:** Do not put commas around essential (restrictive) information: The woman who is sitting four seats to the left is falling asleep. [The location of the woman is essential information].

3. To set off **introductory elements**.
   ✓ After leaving high school, he volunteered for two years.
   ✓ Hearing her name called, she rose from her seat in the jury room.
   ✓ In this box, you will find the treasure you seek.

4. Before a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) when used to **connect main clauses**.
   ✓ We leave food out at night for the stray cats, and it is always gone by the morning.
   ✓ He ran a strong race, but he came in second.

   **Note:** Do not use a comma if the coordinating conjunction connects a main clause and a dependant clause: He ran a strong race but came in second.

5. To **connect free modifiers** to a base sentence.
   ✓ The children sat in three straight rows, fidgeting and squirming in their seats.
   ✓ A few hours later we spotted two small dolphins, startlingly beautiful fish of pure gold, pulsing and fading and changing color.

USE THE COLON (:)
1. After a complete sentence that introduces a **list or a full-sentence quotation**.
   ✓ There are three major ways to cut your risk of heart disease: exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, and reduce stress levels in your everyday life.
   ✓ Hemingway expresses the struggles of the writer this way: “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”
USE THE SEMICOLON ( ; )
1. To connect closely related main clauses.
   - We prepared food for fifty guests; only ten diners showed up.
   - He ran a strong race; however, he came in second.

2. To separate a series of items that contains commas.
   - The committee received suggestions from a veterinarian in Anchorage, Alaska; a lawyer in Medford, Massachusetts, who has handled animal cruelty cases; and an animal rescue worker in New Orleans, Louisiana, who is a specialist in rescuing wild animals in urban settings.

USE THE DASH ( -- )
1. To mark any sudden break and add emphasis.
   - She will finally receive her degree in May—if she survives her final exams.

2. To set off elements added at the end of the sentence.
   - He packed the necessary items in the duffel bag—duct tape, a rope, and an axe.

3. To set off interrupters, especially when they contain commas (a dash works as a “strong” comma).
   - The necessary items—duct tape, a rope, and an axe—were packed in the duffel bag.

   Notes: A dash is not a comma substitute. Use it only sparingly, such as in the cases described above.

USE PARENTHESES ( )
1. To set off and de-emphasize explanatory or less important details inserted into a sentence:
   - Oswaldo was born in Honduras (although he lived there only seven years).

USE THE APOSTROPHE ( ’ )
1. To mark a possessive:
   - That is Ann’s yogurt, so please do not eat it. [singular word, not ending in “s”]
   - The cats’ tails were twitching in irritation. [plural word]
   - The children’s snacks filled the ice chest. [word that is plural without adding “s”]

   Note: The possessive form of “its” doesn’t use an apostrophe: That coat is losing its buttons.

2. To mark the missing part of the word in a contraction (and other omissions).
   - That’s Ann’s yogurt, so please don’t eat it.
   - It's ten o’clock. [originally “It is ten of the clock.”]

3. To form certain plurals when clarity is an issue.
   - The old typewriter doesn’t type e's. (“The ole typewriter doesn’t type es” has a different meaning).

[updated 5-2010]