**Common Punctuation Rules and Errors**

**Use a Period . . .**

1. at the end of sentences
2. after initials or social titles (i.e. Mr., Dr., Ms.)
3. after titles and degrees that follow proper name (i.e. Jr., M.D., Ph.D)
4. after units of measure such as ft., oz., yd., or lb.

**Use Italics . . . (underline when writing by hand)**

1. for titles and subtitles of books (*Ender's Game*), periodicals (*Time* or *Houston Chronicle*), long poems (*The Odyssey*), plays (*The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*), films (*The Matrix*), television series (*Friends*), long musical works and recordings (Handel's *Messiah*), and works of art (*Mona Lisa*).
2. for names of ships (*Titanic*), trains (*Orient Express*), aircraft and spacecraft (*Apollo 13*)
3. for words, letters, numerals, and symbols referred to as such AND for foreign words that are not yet a part of the English language

**EX.** The word *Mississippi* has four *s*'s and four *i*'s.

* 1. The *8* on that license plate looks like an *&*.
  2. The *corrido*, a fast paced ballad, evolved from a musical form brought to America by early Spanish explorers and settlers.

**Use Quotation Marks . . .**

1. to enclose a direct quotation -- a person's exact words

\*A direct quote generally begins with a capital letter EXCEPT when an interrupting expression divides a quoted sentence into two parts in which case the second part begins with a lowercase letter.

\*A direct quote can be set off from the rest of a sentence by a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point, BUT NOT by a period.

1. When used with quotation marks, other marks of punctuation are placed according to the following rules:
   1. Commas and periods are placed inside closing quotation marks
   2. Semicolons and colons are placed outside closing quotation marks
   3. Question marks and exclamation points are placed inside the closing quotation marks if the quotation itself is a question or an exclamation; otherwise, they are placed outside.
2. when you write dialogue (a conversation) begin a new paragraph every time the speaker changes.
3. when a quoted passage consists of more than one paragraph, put quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph and at the end of the entire passage. Do not put quotation marks after any paragraph but the last.

\*NOTE: A long passage (not dialogue) quoted from a book or another printed source is usually set off from the rest of the text. The entire passage is usually indented and double-spaced. When a quoted passage has been set off in one of these ways, no quotation marks are necessary (such as the long quotes used in a research paper).

1. use single quotation marks to enclose a quotation within a quotation.

**EX**. Tiffany said, "How dare you say, 'Yuck!'"

1. to enclose titles and subtitles of articles ("What Teenagers Need to Know About College"), essays ("Charley in Yellowstone"), short stories ("The Sniper"), poems ("Fog"), songs ("Lose Yourself"), episodes of TV Series ("Influenza"), chapters and other parts of books and periodicals ("Pippin Plays Possum")

**Use Apostrophes . . .**

1. to form the possessive case of most singular nouns, and an apostrophe and an s (mayor's desk, Larry's friend)

\*NOTE: for a proper name ending ins s, add only an apostrophe if the name has two or more syllables and if the addition of s would make the name awkward to pronounce (Ulysses' plan, Texas' governor)

1. to form the possessive case of a plural noun ending in s, add only the apostrophe (two birds' feathers, three girls' shoes)

\*NOTE: although most plural nouns end in s, some are irregular. To form the possessive case of a plural noun that does not end in s, add an apostrophe and s. (children's toys, those deer's food)

1. Possessive personal pronouns do not require an apostrophe (my, mine, you, yours, his, her, hers, its, our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs)

\*NOTE: the possessive form of who is whose, not who's. Similarly, do not write it's for its or they're for their.

1. Indefinite pronouns in the possessive case require an apostrophe (nobody's witness, someone's license)
2. Generally, in compound words, names of organizations and businesses, and words showing joint possession, only the last word is possessive in form (community board's meeting, United Fund's drive, Peggy and Lisa's tent).

\*NOTE: the possessive of an acronym is formed by adding an apostrophe and s (NASA's space probe, CBS's hit television series).

1. when two or more persons possess something individually each of their names is possessive in form (Mrs. Martin's and Mrs. Blair's cars).
2. to show where letters, numerals, or words have been omitted in a contraction (I'm for I am, You'll for you will).
3. to prevent confusion, use an apostrophe and an s to form the plurals of lowercase letters, some capital letters, numerals, symbols, and some words that are referred to as words.

**EX.** I got A's on both tests I took last week. The *1*'s in this exercise look like *l*'s.

**Use Hyphens . . .**

1. to divide a word at the end of a line (only between syllables - must have at least two syllables to divide).
2. with compound numbers and with fractions (seventy-six trombones, three-quarters cup).
3. with the prefixes ex-, self-, all-, and great- and/or with the suffixes -elect, -free; and with all prefixes before a proper noun or proper adjective (ex-coach, fat-free).
4. to hyphenate a compound adjective when it precedes the noun it modifies (well-written book, small-town boy).

**Use Parentheses . . .**

1. to enclose material that is added to a sentence but is not considered to be of major importance.

EX. During the Middle Ages (from about A.D. 500 to A.D. 1500) the Vikings invaded parts of Europe.

\*NOTE: use punctuation marks within the parentheses when the punctuation belongs to the parenthetical matter. Do not use punctuation within parentheses if it belongs to the sentence as a whole.

**Use Dashes . . .**

1. to indicate an abrupt break in thought or speech or an unfinished statement or question

**EX**. There are a thousand reasons--well, not a thousand--that we should go.

1. to indicate namely, that it, or in other words or to otherwise introduce an explanation.

**EX**. I know what we could get Mom for Mother's Day--a new photo album.

**Use Ellipsis Points . . .**

1. to mark omissions from quoted materials and pauses in a written passage. Use three dots only.

**Use Brackets . . .**

1. to enclose an explanation within quoted or parenthetical material

**EX**. (See page 15 [Graph 1A] for a time line)