A Survival Guide to Punctuation

I should define punctuation as being governed two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste.

G.V. Carey Mind the Stop

Punctuation can be a tricky subject. British usage differs from American usage, rules keep changing, or so it seems, and inconsistencies abound. Matters are not helped by the fact that each publishing company and newspaper has its own way of punctuating, known as a house style, that may differ in certain respects from those used in other publishing houses. For example, some keep commas to a minimum, feeling that too many commas clog up a sentence; others feel that they help to increase the clarity of a sentence.

In fact, there are only a few punctuation signs that give problems, and only a small number of basic rules that everyone should know. People who can understand the rules may break them, if the need arises; those who cannot, may not.

Apostrophe

The apostrophe has two main uses:

1. To indicate possession

Put the apostrophe before the s in the singular, after it in the plural.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The boy's pizza</td>
<td>The boys' pizza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If a word changes form in the plural and does not end in s (e.g. man - men), treat it as if it were singular and place an apostrophe before the s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The man's chips</td>
<td>The men's chips</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Names, including those ending in s, take an apostrophe and s:

James's pizza
Lynne Truss's book
Yeats's poetry

However, names from classical antiquity tend not to take the s:

Xerxes' pizza
Achilles' chips

Neither does the name Jesus when it refers to the person crucified by the Romans:

Jesus' disciples
However, if you were referring to Jesus, your Spanish pen pal, you should probably write: 
Jesus’s paella

2. To indicate omission

When you drop a letter, you use an apostrophe to take its place:
It's (it is) a great pizza. I don't (do not) like vinegar on chips.

N.B. The following forms are correct:
The dog wagged its tail… no apostrophe
In the Ireland of the 1920s… no apostrophe
He bought some DVDs and CDs… no apostrophe
Here are some dos and don’ts… one apostrophe only

Comma
The comma has at least five main uses:

1. Commas are used to separate items in a list.
   I like pizza, chips, sausages and spaghetti.

   In British usage there tends not to be a comma before the final and. American usage generally requires it.

2. Commas are used to join two complete sentences using although, and, but, or, while and yet where you feel a pause is appropriate to emphasise the separateness of the ideas.
   I like pizza, but I love chips.

   But
   He sat down and ate his pizza.

3. Commas can fill gaps where a word or phrase has been dropped.
   People who can understand the rules may break them, if the need arises; those who cannot, may not.

   Here, the final comma replaces understand the rules.

4. Commas introduce direct speech.
   He said, 'I love pizza.'

5. Commas frame parenthetical (extra) information.
   Pizzas and chips, both of which I like, are fattening.

Semi-colon
The semi-colon causes more head-scratching than any other punctuation mark. Lynne Truss, in *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, attributes its appearance in modern punctuation to Aldus Manutius
the Elder, a Venetian printer, and performs the remarkable feat of dating its first appearance to 1494 in a text entitled De Aetna. Bizarrely, it is used in ancient Greek to serve as a question mark. It is hard to find agreement on all the possible uses claimed for it. Paul Robinson, in his essay *The Philosophy of Punctuation*, claims that 'more than half of the semicolons one sees...should be periods, and probably another quarter should be commas', and frowns on its use. Robert Nichols, an editor, disagrees:

I cannot go along with his dismissal of the semicolon, one of the glories of the written world, and - contrary to what he says - vastly underused. I am not alone. ‘There are those who have a prejudice against the semicolon; personally I find it a very useful stop’ - thus speaks Gordon Vero Carey, the author of ‘Mind the Stop’ (1939), a small but impressively lucid book on punctuation. Carey’s own words prove his case. In the sentence I have just quoted, he uses a semicolon after ‘semicolon’, and it is hard to see how the sentence could work as well without it. A comma would be just plain wrong without a co-ordinating conjunction, the presence of which would have undermined the moral toughness of the sentence. And to break the sentence in two would produce an unattractive jerkiness.

The semi-colon seems to have four main uses:

1. To create a sense of balance between two phrases.
   *When angry, count four; when very angry, swear.* (Mark Twain)

   *A Trinity College man here tells me the Irish don’t say Jesus; but he is the son of a schoolmaster.*
   (H.L.Mencken)

   *The ignorant, the rebellious and the daring come forward with their brilliant barbarisms; the learned and conservative bring up their objections.* (H.L.Mencken)

2. To join two complete sentences not linked by *and, or, but, while or yet*.
   *I like pizza; I absolutely love chips.*

3. To join two ideas that are connected logically.
   *The pizza was enormous; I thought I’d never finish it.*

4. Before *however, nevertheless and consequently* in a sentence.
   *The pizza was good; however, the chips were perfect.*

**Colon**

The colon has four main uses.

1. To introduce an explanatory statement.
   *Of course I love pizza: I'm Italian.*

2. To introduce a list.
I like the following: pizza, chips, sausages and broccoli.

3. To produce the impression of a dramatic pause before an announcement.
   I loved her for this reason above all: she made great pizza.

4. To set off a long quotation (more than about forty words of prose and more than two lines of verse):

   In Act III, Hamlet, having already alerted the audience to his morbidity, says:
   To be, or not to be: that is the question:
   Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
   The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
   Or to take arms against a sea of troubles…

**Quotation marks (Inverted commas)**

The accepted British practice at the moment is to use single quotation marks when quoting from a text or when quoting direct speech:

   When Hamlet refers to himself as 'a dull and muddy-mettled rascal' in this scene…

In quoting direct speech, care must be taken to place the period (full stop) in the correct position:

   John said, 'I'd love some pizza.'

But

   'I'd love some pizza,' said John.

Do not follow a question mark or an exclamation mark with a comma:

   'Would you like some pizza?' asked John.

   'I don't want chips!' John shouted.

When quoting within a quotation, double inverted commas are used:

   Fred said, 'I heard John ask "Would you like some pizza?"'

There is disagreement as to whether or not that final period should be there in sentences such as the last one above. Some sources say it should be punctuated as follows:

   Fred said, 'I heard John ask "Would you like some pizza?"'
Punctuation nightmares

You may have heard of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee. Have you read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*?

John said, 'Have you read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*?'

Did John say, 'Have you read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'?'

Were his words ' Did John say, "Have you read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*"?'?

Note the differences in meaning effected by changes in punctuation:

- A woman without her man is nothing.
- A woman: without her, man is nothing.
- A woman? Without her man - is nothing!
- A woman? Without her, man is nothing?

Punctuate the following:

1. I want a man who knows what love is all about you are generous kind thoughtful people who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior you have ruined me for other men I yearn for you I have no feelings whatsoever when were apart I can be forever happy will you let me be yours

2. Although I can go days without a pizza no doctor can help me to give them up completely is my secret desire the problem self discipline may be the solution lies in diet books are discouraging people capable of making a difference this way

3. - What is this thing called love
- Get stuck in guys
- Go get him surgeons
- Get stuffed mushrooms

If you absolutely must know more about punctuation, the following are useful sources:

