GRiffin’S SHORT, SWEET PUNCTUATION GUIDE
GUARD IT WITH YOUR LIFE; CONSULT IT FAITHFULLY

COMMAS

• between major “modules” or units in a sentence:

  This chapter is significant in relation to the novel as a whole, and it deserves careful study.
  (two independent clauses joined by conjunction “and”)

  Although many have studied this phenomenon, no one has successfully explained it.
  introductory clause main clause

  When the book was published, it was widely attacked by critics and readers, as it took
  introductory clause main clause
  unusual risks in speaking openly about sex, a subject not discussed publicly at the time.
  subordinate clause concluding descriptive phrase

• to set off parenthetical phrases that “digress” or “interrupt” the flow of the sentence”

  The novel, written forty years ago, seems remarkably contemporary.

  The protagonist is a woman who, despite her family’s objections, marries out of her class.

• between adjectives before a noun: He has a flowery, verbose writing style.

• between listed nouns: She designs offices, schools, and private homes.

SEMICOLONS

• to separate independent clauses closely related to each other in meaning or implication (independent clause =
  group of words that could stand alone as a sentence):

  The narrator is obviously unreliable; he lies on several occasions.
  The critics were unanimous in their praise; however, sales were terrible.
  He didn’t laugh; he didn’t even smile.

  Note: in each example, a period could replace the semicolon.

• to replace commas in a list in which there are already several commas (for reasons of clarity):

  There were public performances on Sunday, February 3, 1886; Thursday, July 2, 1887; and Monday, September 6, 1888.

  The setting has everything a Gothic novel needs, including an ancient, decrepit castle full of friendly bats; a madwoman, who turns out to be the dead hero’s mother, locked in an attic room; and nearly constant lightning storms, even in the dead of winter.
COLONS

General rule #1: a colon always follows an independent clause (i.e., could be a sentence).
General rule #2: a colon points forward, to something that will clarify or exemplify what's just been said.

- before specifying or identifying something previously mentioned:
  
  *His work was characterized by two features: strong opinion and extensive evidence.*

  *Jefferson was quite explicit in the Declaration: when he said that all men were created equal, he meant just that.*

- before an example or a piece of evidence, including a quotation:
  
  *The article kept repeating itself: it told us three times what time President Lincoln died.*

  *They had a history of car trouble: dropped transmissions, flat tires, muffler blowouts, etc.
  Her attitude toward marriage is hardly optimistic: “It should probably be regarded as a kind of endurance contest” (43).*

DASH vs. HYPHEN

* A hyphen is typed like this: -
  A dash is typed like this: --

- Hyphens combine
  
  *separate words into compound words: ten-year-old boy  absent-minded professor  gang-related crimes
  *words with prefixes: self-respect  cross-cultural  ex-president

- Dashes are longer and they separate. Sometimes they work like stronger commas or like parentheses.
  
  *My point—and believe it or not, I do have one—is that it is time for change.*

  *Your thesis—at least insofar as I can understand it, given my lack of background in the subject—seems very persuasive.*

APOSTROPHES

- indicate possession: singular
  
  *my parent’s views  a woman’s perspective  society’s restrictions

  plural
  
  *my parents’ views  women’s perspectives  many societies’ restrictions

- replace omitted letters in contractions: *can’t, wouldn’t, I’m, you’re*

- exception: used with “it’s” only as a contraction: "It’s great that the company rewards its employees with big bonuses"