Tips on Punctuation

Semicolons

Separates clauses but is usually avoided in newswriting. For example: Instead of “The Padres are weak this year; they have the worst record in the league.” most journalists would write. “The Padres are weak this year. They have the worst record in the league.”

The most notable exception:

Use a semicolon between items in a series that has commas inside the items.

Their diet consists of juice, toast and coffee for breakfast; fruit with yogurt, cottage cheese or tofu for lunch; and lean meat, vegetables and a starch for dinner.

Dashes

Use dashes to set off a list or parenthetical material containing commas in the middle of a sentence:

The Jayhawks’ defense -- the lineman, the linebackers and the defensive backs -- was exhausted after being pounded by the Sooner defense.

Use a dash for emphasis when a pause longer than a comma is needed:

He said he would do it -- later.

Parentheses

Parentheses are used to set off asides, such as non-essential information or words inserted to clarify a quotation. If the aside contains at least one complete sentence, the period at the end is put inside the parentheses. If not, it goes outside.

He said his favorite movie was “La dolce vita” (The Good Life).

Ellipses

Replaces omitted words, usually in quotes.

Three dots ... if the sentence continues after the omitted words; four dots .... if the omission comes at the end of a sentence. There should be space before and after the ellipses.
“I’ve wanted to play pro basketball since I was a kid ....”

“I always knew I could be successful ... and now it has finally happened.”

Hyphens

Use a hyphen between compound adjectives that precede the word they modify (commonly called a compound modifier).

Police said Price is a well-known felon.
Jones has done first-rate work during his two years at the firm.

No hyphen is necessary if the adjectives come after the noun.

Police said Price’s record as a felon is well known.
Jones work at the firm has been first rate.

Do not use a hyphen after very or an adverb ending in -ly.

Apostrophes

Use an apostrophe to show something has been left out in contractions.

don’t, I’ll, decade of the ‘90s, rock ‘n’ roll

Use an apostrophe with a pronoun to form a contraction

it’s (it is), who’s (who is)

Use an apostrophe and s to form the possessive of a noun, either singular or plural, that does not end in s:

women, women’s                   child, child’s
the Smiths, the Smiths’          countries, countries’

Be careful not to confuse possessive with plural.
Colons

Use a colon to introduce a list:

In other action, the commission:

-- Approved Belle Kaufman’s request that she be allowed to build a guest house in back of her home.

-- Rejected the request by Ralph Hodges that a parcel of land he owns on Route 10 be rezoned to allow him to build a dog-race track.

Use a colon to introduce a single-item summary or explanation with a dramatic pause:

He said you could summarize Jesus’ message in three words: “Love thy neighbor.”

Use a colon to take the place of says in a headline:

Jackson: “I want to be your president.”

Note: A section on punctuation also is included in your Associated Press Stylebook.

Source: Working with Words by Brian S. Brooks & James L. Pinson