PUNCTUATION

November 2002
Use a comma to set off the elements of a series (three or more things), including the last two.

*My favorite uses of the Internet are sending e-mail, surfing the Web, and using chat rooms.*

You may have learned that this comma is not necessary. Sometimes, however, the last two items in your series will group into one if you don't use the so-called **serial comma**.
Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so) to separate two clauses.

The public seems eager for some kind of gun control legislation, but the congress is obviously too timid to enact any truly effective measures.

If the two independent clauses are brief and nicely balanced, this comma may be omitted, but the comma is always correct.

Our team is very good but their team is better.
Use a comma to set off introductory elements.

In the winter of 1644, nearly half the settlers died of starvation or exposure.

If the introductory element is brief and the sentence can be read easily without the comma, it can be omitted.

In 1649 the settlers abandoned their initial outpost.
Use a comma to set off elements that express a **contrast** or a **turn** in the sentence.

The house was cute, *but* too expensive for the newlyweds.

They were looking for something practical, *not* luxurious.
The Colon: a sentence gateway

The colon comes at a point in the sentence where the sentence *could* come to a complete stop.

I’m going to tell you the names of my favorite breakfast foods.

We could even put a period after the word “foods,” couldn’t we? In fact, we did.
We know, however, what’s going to come after this period.

I’m going to tell you the names of my favorite breakfast foods:

\[
\text{A LIST of breakfast foods.}
\]

I’m going to tell you the names of my favorite breakfast foods: \textit{eggs, cornflakes, oatmeal, juice, and yogurt on toast.}

The colon “announces” that a list is about to follow; it is the gateway to that list.
Would I use a colon in the sentence below?

*My favorite breakfast foods are eggs, cornflakes, oatmeal, juice, and yogurt on toast.*

No, because the sentence does not come to a halt here.

Instead, the sentence flows right into the list. A colon would not be appropriate here.
Examine this next sentence carefully.

Would I use a colon?

Our math tutor wants just one thing from us: that we try our best.

Here, we have a complete thought (ending with “us”).

followed by an explanation

To set off this explanation, we can use a colon.

Our math tutor wants just one thing from us: that we try our best.
We also use the colon to set off a formal quotation.

My father was always using his favorite quotation from Yogi Berra: “It ain’t over till it’s over.”
THE MIGHTY APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe has only a handful of uses, but these uses are very important. A misplaced apostrophe can be annoying — not to mention lonely.

The apostrophe is used:

1. to create possessives
2. to show contractions
3. to create some plural forms
The apostrophe is used to create possessive forms for singular and plural nouns, especially nouns referring to people.

The mayor’s car, my father’s moustache, Pedrito’s sister, Joe Kennedy’s habits
When a noun already ends in “s,” you can decide whether or not to use another “s” after the apostrophe.

Charles’s car OR Charles’ car

With multisyllabic words, don’t add another “s” after the apostrophe.

Dumas’ second novel, Jesus’ birth, Socrates’ ideas, Illinois’ legislature
To form the possessive of a plural noun, we pluralize first and then add the apostrophe.

The Kennedys' house
The children's playhouse
The travelers' expectations

Notice that with an irregular plural, the apostrophe will come before the “s.”
A contraction allows us to blend sounds by omitting letters from a verb construction. The apostrophe shows where something is left out.

I am a student here = I'm a student here.

I have been working on the railroad. = I've been working on the railroad.

They could have been great together. = They could've been great together.
Use a period [.] at the end of a sentence that makes a statement.

Use a period at the end of a command.
*Hand in the poster essays no later than noon on Friday.*
*In case of tremors, leave the building immediately.*

Use a period at the end of an indirect question.
*The teacher asked why Maria had left out the easy exercises.*
*My father used to wonder why Egbert's ears were so big.*
Use a period with abbreviations:

Dr. Espinoza arrived from Washington, D.C., at 6 p.m.

Notice that when the period ending the abbreviation comes at the end of a sentence, it will also suffice to end the sentence. On the other hand, when an abbreviation ends a question or exclamation, it is appropriate to add a question mark or exclamation mark after the abbreviation-ending period:

Did you enjoy living in Washington, D.C.?