Step Fourteen:
Basic Punctuation/Grammar Errors

Over the course of the year, these are the things that I've continually corrected in the majority of your work. As I've said all year, if the only problem we've got with your work is basic grammar errors, we're doing alright. However, at this point, it's also good for you to be able to edit your own work for these basic punctuation/grammar rules so then the only problem with your work is more minor, minute details.

Stay in Tense

Something many of us have struggled this year is staying in a consistent tense throughout a work. EX. if you're writing in past tense, to stay in past tense, or if you're writing in present tense to stay in present tense. Typically, this **isn't** because you are ignorant as to **how** to keep the same tense, but rather because you don't go back over your work with a fine-toothed comb looking for these potential errors. The majority of these corrections need to come from a place of patience and close reading, however, there are a couple of "cheats" you can do to help with some of the more flagrant mistakes.

If you are writing in past tense: use the "Find" tool in your word processor and search for "is", "was", and "ing". It will highlight instances that you use these words, which typically mean that you switched to present tense and need to revise.

If you are writing in present tense: use the "Find" tool in your word processor and search for "ed". It will highlight more than you need (literally anytime the letters "e" and "d" are next to each other), but you can look for any words that end in "ed", which probably means you switched to past tense and need to revise.

IF YOU ARE USING PUNCTUATION, BELOW ARE HELPFUL RULES

Punctuating Dialogue Correctly

1. **The period goes inside the quote**
   Would you believe this is the most common mistake writers make when punctuating dialogue? When a complete sentence is spoken the period always goes inside the quote.
   Ex. "It's time to pay the piper."
2. **Where does the comma go?**
   The most common way to indicate speech is to write dialogue in quotation marks and attribute it to a speaker with **dialogue tags**, such as _he said_ or _she_

said or *Margaret replied.* This is what we call "attribution" when you're punctuating dialogue.

- When the speaker is attributed **after** the dialogue, you **insert a comma inside the quotation marks.**
  ex. "Come closer so I can see you," said the old man.
- If the dialogue ends in a **question mark or exclamation point**, those pieces of punctuation would **replace the comma**.
  Ex. "Why are you acting so weird?" Roshan asked.
  "I'm just happy!" Ritika replied.
- If the speaker is attributed **before** the dialogue, there is a **comma outside the quotation marks**.
  Ex. Aleela whimpered, "I don't want to. I'm scared."

3. **Using action beats as tags**
   The primary purpose of a dialogue tag when an author is punctuating dialogue is to let readers know who is speaking. But sometimes, this can be achieved without using a traditional *he said/she said* tag at all. Instead, you can choose to break up a line of dialogue with an action beat . Action beats are ONLY the action of a character, there's NO dialogue tag/attribution. In these cases, **the punctuation inside the quotation marks should follow conventional rules**.
   "How interesting." Dad turned on his heel, like a TV lawyer. "If neither of you ate the cookie, then who did?"

4. **Breaking up dialogue with a tag**
   - Sometimes, writers choose to interrupt a speaker's line with a <u>dialogue tag</u> before allowing them to continue. If the dialogue tag takes place **between complete sentences, cap it off with a period.** After the tag, resume the quote with the next sentence (which begins with a **capital letter**).
     Ex. "I'm not opposed to change," said Boris. "If Aunt Carol wants to cook chicken for Thanksgiving, I really don't care."
   - However, if the dialogue tag comes partway through a sentence (i.e. the first part of dialogue is NOT a complete sentence on its own), then it will be **followed by a comma**. There is **no need to capitalize the first letter of the next quote**, as we are resuming the previous spoken sentence.
     Ex. "Whenever mother goes to Paris," Tetsuo smirked, "she always stops at Ladurée on the Champs Elysées for a dozen macarons."

5. **Interrupting speech**
   When a speaking character is cut off, either by another person or a sudden event, use **an em-dashes (i.e. longer hyphen: "—". alt-shift-dash on your keyboard to create) <u>inside</u> the quotation marks.**
   Ex. "Captain, we only have twenty seconds before—"
   It was already too late. A deafening explosion ripped through the ship's hull.
   Or

"Ali, please tell me what's going—"

"There's no use talking!" he barked.

You can also overlap dialogue to show one character speaking over another.

Ex. Mathieu put his feet up as the lecturer continued. "Current estimates indicate that a human mission will land on Mars within the next decade—"

"Fat chance."

"—with colonization efforts following soon thereafter."

6. **Interrupting dialogue with action**

   Often, you the writer/narrator will want to butt in with some narration in the middle of some dialogue. This might be to insert action or show a character's reaction to what's just been said. In this case, **use the em-dash outside the quotation marks**.

   Ex. "The president is dead"—the room fell silent—"and I'm the man who killed him."

7. **Dialogue that trails off**

   Sometime, people won't finish their sentences, and it's not because they've been interrupted. You can indicate the speaker trailing off with an **ellipsis (…) inside the quotation marks**.

   Ex. Velasquez patted each of his pockets. "I swear I had my keys…"

   An ellipsis can also suggest a small pause between two people speaking.

   Ex. Daniel was in shock. "I can't believe…"

   "Yeah, me neither," said Landon.

8. **Quotations within dialogue**

   In the course of natural speech, people will often directly quote what other people said. If this is the case, **use single quotation marks (') within the doubles (")** and follow all other rules of punctuating dialogue.

   Ex. "What did Randy say to you?" Beattie asked.

   "He told me, 'I got you something special for Christmas and I think you're going to like it,' and then he left. Strange, huh?"

9. **A new paragraph when the speaker changes**

   This is one of the basic rules of writing. To make it easier for readers to follow what's happening, **start a new paragraph every time the speaker changes,** even if you're using dialogue tags to make it clear.

   Ex. "What do you think you're doing?" asked the policeman.

   "Oh, nothing, officer. Just looking for my hat," I replied.

   The new paragraph doesn't always have to start with direct quotes. Whenever the focus moves from one speaker to the other, that's when you hit 'enter.' Here's an alternative.

   Ex. "What do you think you're doing?" asked the policeman.

   I scrambled for an answer. "Oh, nothing, officer. Just looking for my hat."

   Imagine you're watching the dialogue play out in front of you in real life. Every time you feel like you would turn your head and look at a different character, either because they've started to speak, or you're anticipating their reply, *that's* when you would start a new paragraph.

10. **Internal dialogue**

It's not uncommon for characters to hear *exactly* what characters are thinking, especially with close third person limited and omniscient narration. If you want to express the actual words he's thinking, a lot of authors choose to **use italics.**

Ex. Richard spied the burning Caddy. *There's only one guy in town who owns that model,* he thought. *My brother.*

You can also use quotation marks when writing thoughts, instead of italics. The most important thing is to maintain consistency throughout your work.

Basic Comma Rules

This is by no means a definitive list of all comma rules, but they are the ones I correct most often.

- Use a comma before coordinating conjunctions (but, and, yet, so, etc.) that join independent clauses (i.e. complete sentences)
  - In other words, if on either side of the connecting word are complete sentences, the connecting word needs a comma before it.
  - Ex. I wanted to go hiking, but it was too cold

    complete sentence   COMMA   complete sentence
                          + connector
  - If the phrases on either side of the connecting word is NOT a complete sentence, you do NOT need a comma.
  - Ex. I wanted a soda and a sandwich.

    complete sentence   Connector   incomplete sentence
- Using commas with Conjunctive Adverbs (therefore, meanwhile, otherwise, however, etc.).
  - If the conjunctive adverb falls **at the beginning of a sentence**, it should be **followed by a comma**.
  - Ex. Dave likes bananas. However, he wasn't in the mood for one today

    complete sentence + period   Conj. Adv. + COMMA   complete sentence
  - If the conjunctive adverb **interrupts a single thought**, place a comma on **both sides**.
  - Ex. Aria, however, didn't want an ice cream cone.
  - When a conjunctive adverb falls **between two complete thoughts**, place a **semicolon** on one side and a **comma** on the other.
  - EX. Jessica doesn't like dessert; otherwise, she'd eat the cake.

    complete sentence + semicolon   Conj. Adv. + COMMA   complete sentence
  - Basically, conjunctive adverbs are **always surrounded** by punctuation, like a sandwich.
  - Ex. Margot loves apple pie; she doesn't like it with ice cream, however.
    Margot loves apple pie; she, however, doesn't like it with ice cream.

Margot loves apple pie; <u>however</u>, she doesn't like it with ice cream.
Margot loves apple pie. However, she doesn't like it with ice cream.

- Use a comma **after introductory clauses**, phrases, and words before main clauses.
    - Ex. While I was running, a dog walked by.
    Having finished the test early, I went to lunch.
    Well, the car is parked.
- Use commas with **interjected phrases**. Also known as **parenthetical phrases**. Meaning, if the phrase could be put within parentheses as an aside/additional comment, it means it needs **commas on either side of the phrase**.
    - Ex. That day, which was Fat Tuesday, was the only day I could sleep.
    OR: The professor of the class is interesting. The material, on the other hand, is not.